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Spring 2018

Mother, Momma

Leah Waughtal
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MOTHER, MOMMA

by

Leah Waughtal

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the English

Celine Izsak
Thesis Mentor

Spring 2018

All requirements for graduation with Honors in the
English have been completed.

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Abstract

My collection is in the genre of linked stories. Each installment is a stand-alone creation, but when juxtaposed against the other stories a larger narrative arc is created. The mediums I've utilized are diverse: stream of consciousness style narration, epistolary entries, a heavy poetic inclination, and found domestic materials. The characters of my piece inhabit three different eras, the 1960's, 1990's, and contemporary 2018. However, they are all lodged in the same geographical location: Midwestern America. All of the characters are white working class.

Thematically my collection seeks to unearth definitions of femininity. I chase the fluctuating and elusive language that is used to discuss womanhood, specifically on the micro-scale – between mothers and daughters. The stories work in tandem to probe intergenerational constructions and explore gatekeeping. I want to ask: who teaches us what femininity is? Who controls the performance? These stories are also deeply concerned with bodies and the mechanics of inhabiting one within the confines of a deeply gendered society. To elaborate further I will use my characters as vehicles to discuss these topics. Grace, a working mother, struggles with the exhaustive nature of domestic labor, and the tedious acrobatic balance between providing care for her child and being a “competent” worker. For her daughter, Gertie, we see these themes explode into vivid experiences with mental illness and body image. Jessica, the third generation in this family, grapples with the poverty she endures and the emotional labor she performs for her adult mother, an inversion of their parent child relationship. These relationships rise together to create a three dimensional experience of femininity, and what it means to inhabit a gendered body.

On the point of craft, my thesis combats traditional narratives, for example, Hemingway and the volatile masculinity he writes of in his linked story collection, *In Our Time*. My work moves towards the quiet, little violences in the routine lives of female identified individuals. The genre of linked stories in particular is a deliberate choice because it tackles the fractured and dissociative nature of trauma. It also allows the space for multiple marginal characters to speak instead of a single empowered voice. Ultimately these stories were written to create mirrors for which readers can see themselves reflected back, represented.

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“Can you lay with me? Just lay for a little while?”

The volume on the TV is a quiet crackle. If I rest my head against the cupboard, I can see the TV screen. It leaves a crick in my neck but the cord only stretches so far and I already pushed it in from the living room to the kitchen doorway. The black and white checkers of the linoleum are only broken by the red soaked across his clothes. I laid them out so I could see where to begin. In the morning they will be dazzlingly white, painful even to look at. The bucket of bleach water, the cornstarch and the WD 40 are all ready for me. Bill's ex-wife, who lives across the street from the Fletchers, told me when I was hosting the cakewalk for Gertie's school that cola works for stains too, but I don't trust hussies who let their fifteen year old daughters get pregnant. MASH comes on. That means it's 1:30 and Gertie has to be up in four hours. When the screen goes black I can hear Earl snoring from our bedroom, that chainsaw in his chest never stops.

The red goes pink under my palms. It goes slow. I dip and rinse, wipe and wring, I can feel my fingertips cracking open. Earl says his pants and shirts are always the cleanest, better than any of the other men who work down at the locker. Says their wives leave big yellow stains from the peroxide on theirs. They don't do it like I do. I think it makes him a little proud to have a wife like me. I've got practice though, pigs blood can't hold a candle to wiping down the slippery pink newborns at the hospital. Shirts can't fight you back. Can't scream either.

I might be able to get a few hours in. The breakfast casserole is already prepared. It just needs to cook through. Hash browns, cubed ham and onions. Half an hour in the oven? Then it will be Gertie at the bus stop with enough time for Earl to drop me at the hospital. Then putting on coffee in the doctor's lounge, extra dark for the caffeine. Bad for the trembling hands though, but better to work mornings than graveyard shifts.

“You always know just how I like it.” Doctor Jensen always whispered into the back of my neck, the hot coffee cup scalding in his right hand. Almost black. The hospital hallways had been dimmed but the lounge was blazing bright. That night my pearls felt like they might choke me. I reached for them and felt their weight at my throat. My hands stuttered, I was floating, not even quite awake yet. Jensen was always pushing.

I fold Earl’s pants, then the shirts and finish. My knees creak when I rise to drop them into the washer. One final bath. I catch my face in the mirror above the bathroom sink when I pass it in the hall. My hands are empty. I look down at them, the pants? I stalk back to the washer and check - they are there. I press hard on my eyes. The night is turning a little milky at the edges. When I pass the bathroom a second time, I don’t turn my head, I don’t see myself.

Doctor Jensen likes to stand in the doorway of the lounge and watch me late at night. “Your hair, Grace! I bet Earl loves it.” That night his big fingers had reached toward my face. I swore even the white lilies outside had flinched. My perm was particularly tight, I knew that, I had Mrs. Johnson do it last week and hadn’t even washed it yet. I imagined all those chemicals, that sharp little burn against my scalp, what they might do to his insides if I poured them down his throat. “Your dress looks especially white today, Grace. You could teach my lady a thing or two about wifely duties.” His smile had been huge, too big for his face. I never let my perm get too loose.

Sometimes I’d hear the younger nurses who worked beneath me talk about Doctor Jensen. Oh those little women would swoon. They all had babies, teeny tiny ones. I wanted to grab them and shake them, tell them to go the hell home. Gertie, my baby, was already seven. The nurses talked about all the men that way though. Their little bird mouths were always filled

with gossip, even when I'd swat at them to finish up their charts. I never sounded like them. They didn't know. They didn't understand.

When I had been asked to teach, to take on rounds of the new nurses I had felt a little pang of joy. I had rushed home to tell Earl and he had smiled at me and then asked if I would fix him a bowl of ice cream after supper. We all ate together that night grinning. It came with a nice little bump in pay and what I liked most was the control. They listened to me, following me around like baby ducks and did exactly as I said. But that was also when it started. I remember Margaret Anne and her little bird mouth when she told me the gossip she had caught.

"Too big for my britches." She had whispered to me, her blonde eyebrows raised high and pointed. I'd brushed her off, told her to quit it. The hiccup in my voice was silenced when I gritted my teeth. It woke up something mean in me.

"Margaret Anne, there are sick folks all over this hospital and you're flouncing around the nurses station blathering?"

She had backed away cautious and never said anything like that to me again. But after that I made the point to smile always at all the doctors, sometimes huge and painful. Uppity. I cooked, I cleaned, I raised my child. Uppity.

"Mother?" Her voice is wet. I can hear the tears already. The kitchen is dim and her round face glows under the oven light. She wrinkles her little pig nose. Earl's nose, his mother even has it, God bless her. "It smells funny in here".

"It's just the ammonia, I was cleaning. Why are you up? You have school in the morning. C'mon now."

"I had a bad dream. In it you and Daddy were- and the bird- the dead birdy-"

"Hush. I'm busy Gertie. Get back in bed. I'll tuck you in."

Last week a goldfinch hit my clean picture window. I tried to cover it with a tissue and throw it away before Gertie saw, but when I looked up from my kneeling spot on the porch she was staring down at me.

I clasp her miniature shoulders. She is soft in all the right places. Sometimes I like to stand still for a long while and just squeeze her. I just don't always have enough time to. But I do breakfast, PTA meetings, red velvet for the cakewalk, I make homemade cookie trees for Christmas, that is love, and I do those things. She scrambles beneath the quilts gracelessly. So much of her father in her little body. Her pupils are wide, little circles of sun illuminated beneath her nightlight. I feel a smile crawl its way out from beneath my drowsy heart.

"You will close your eyes and when you open them again, it will be morning." Even my voice is exhausted.

"Can you lay with me? Just lay for a little while?"

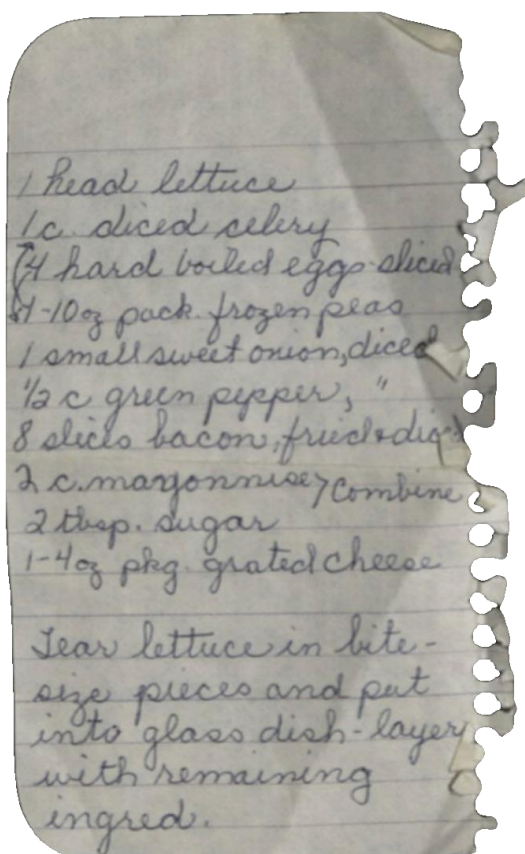
Something old and tired stirs in me, "Gertie, you know I can't. You know how much I have to do." She nods her head, her bobbed curls bouncing. Hers are natural. God, I wish mine were. When I run my hands over her quilt I feel pangs of jealousy, what a dream to slip inside and sink down into those clean sheets. Lavender and lemongrass. I push back her dark hair to leave a kiss on her forehead.

I roll the TV back into the living room. I leave it on and float, too afraid to fall too far into sleep, there isn't enough time for that. Sometime after sunrise I can hear the bedsprings squeak in the bedroom. Earl is up. Next is the shower. He moves like clockwork. Turns the hot up until its scorching, he always comes out pink and raw. He says it's the only way he can wake up. Next is shaving. Always missing that spot on the corner of his jaw, just beneath his right ear. Some mornings he comes out spotted with toilet paper, tiny specks of red clinging to his face.

Doctor Jensen wears the same aftershave he does. I bought him a new bottle with a different scent but Earl insists the original is better. Next he'll find his fresh clothes where I left them folded. Breakfast will be on the table before he even sits down. Work feels so far away with so much to do in between.

“I have a delivery this afternoon. I requested you to assist me. I hope you don't mind.” His hands were loud menacing instruments. He never touched me. I never let him touch me. Instead I nodded. Smiled. Said something about babies, about new life, about miracles, about how lucky I was to have my own baby at home. He wilted at that but just barely. He still stood too close. I wanted to mention Earl but instead I thought of his jugular. Of that pen at his throat, blue ink all over his white coat. His stethoscope pressed so hard into his ears that they met brain matter. An umbilical cord used as a noose. Anything. I had watched the elevator light pass through the numbers. What would be worse would be the doors sliding open on my floor and having the whole world see him there, all hot breath, I knew how it looked. My authority would dissolve like the sugar cubes he loaded into his coffee. Uppity would become a dream in comparison.

I leave the sofa, my body tight and twisted, painful. I put the casserole in the oven and then I start on dinner so it'll be ready after my shift.



I open the fridge. Find the lettuce, tomatoes, celery and carrots. I spread them like instruments across the kitchen counter. I shave the carrots into long slender pieces. The crack of the head of lettuce splitting in half fills the kitchen and my shoulders relax. I snap the stalks of celery and inch by inch cube them into sharp tiny pieces. I run the corner of my blade across the smooth red flesh of the tomato. I split it end from end. The counter is soaked in its pulp. I fill a bowl and run a towel across the counter and make it clean again. I lift the salad in handfuls and toss it gently. I dig my fingers into the bottom of the bowl and bring a soft, wet, red, rind to my mouth. His hands tighten around my hips and a sob cracks open in my throat.

"Grace, honey. Grace? Honey, honey what's the matter?"

The knife is on the floor.

NURSING/PHARMACY
COMMUNICATION MEMO

PATIENT _____ RM.# _____

DATE _____ NR. _____

____ NPO - Pre-Op
____ NPO - Until further notice
____ Resume Medications

MEDICATIONS NOT ADMINISTERED

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

REASONS:

____ Refused	____ Pt. in X-Ray
____ Discontinued	____ Pt. in O.R.
____ Condition Changed	____ Pt. in Nuc.Med
____ Nausea	____ Pt. in P.T.
____ Wasted	____ Other

NURSE: _____

COMMENTS: _____

Micro Caramel Corn

1 c brown sugar

$\frac{1}{4}$ c corn syrup white

1 stick oleo

1 tsp salt

can add
Peanuts

Bring to boil then
cook on full power
 $2\frac{1}{2}$ minutes - then
add 1 tsp soda & stir
pour over 4 qts pop-
corn in brown bag
cook $1\frac{1}{2}$ minutes shake
& cook $1\frac{1}{2}$ minutes
more pour out on cookie
sheet & cool.

“You’re fine, stop this.”

If my body had no bones, this ledge could slice me in two, come up between my shoulder blades, then the top of my head. I’d pour over both sides, a soup, a putty. I am halfway there, halfway to split. My feet look like little swollen knobs. I made Jessica lock the door behind her. I stripped off. I don’t let her look at me. I make her hold a towel up between us, make her turn her head the other way when I step in too. Jessica put the soap on the caddy where I can reach it, she put me here too. I lather it and run the suds against my rubber skin. I turn the knob slow and the water scalds. Hot liquid, caramel on burnt fingertips.

I remember the first time I was put here. My mother closed the curtain around me and handed me a thin silver handled razor. She sat on the toilet. “Don’t shave above the knee. Never shave above the knee, only hussies shave above the knee.” I lay on my back at the bottom of the tub and raised my leg to my chest, and ran the blade from ankle to kneecap. It made me smooth and porpoise-like. I want it again, warm, sinking past hard porcelain. I could be in the backseat of my car, windows fogged over. I could be in my own bed, sheets stuck to clammy skin. I tighten my eyes shut and raise my foot, pulling my knee higher, reaching my fingertips to my ankle. I want to feel my skin clean like that again.

The shower rings go first, each one a sharp snap as they break. The curtain gives way beneath me, a wall dissolving. My head hits the tile and my body follows wet and sliding.

There are thin strands of milky grey hair smeared across the bowl of the toilet, its wide white porcelain stretches above my face. It is all I can see now. I pull at one of them, a strand black and stiff, wiry, now soaked with condensation it twists and clings, somehow looking both small and sharp. It came from my body, I know it did, it is mine. I fantasize about rolling it into a tight knot and swallowing it, fibrous and familiar. Instead I watch it lift and float in the heat. The

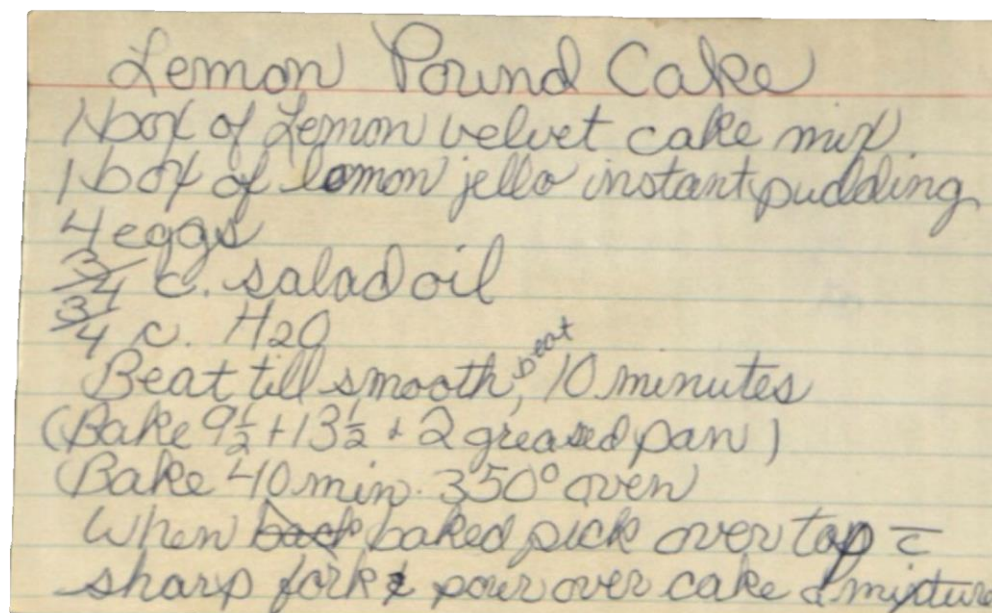
hot air hovers at the corners of the room. My eyes roll back and forth quick, tracking the wallpaper curling, revealing tendrils of dark mold. They change. Rorschach test me, bunny, child, mountains, devil, trees, goat, scorpion, devil, eyes, devil, open mouth, devil. My eyes are round floating orbs that won't shut.

“Momma? Momma!”

It's Jessica. The shower curtain is yanked open and the spray is lukewarm. It's pooling and I can feel it running through the cracks in the tile beneath me, this is where I have kneeled before. The smell of the bleach and Comet - mother pouring these chemicals into the tunnel of the toilet - and now I am lodged here. I gag and reach for the edge of the tub and it dangles out of reach for a moment. I can see it there, where I had just been, sitting on the edge of the claw foot. I tighten my face hard, eating up my eyes, squeezing them up.

“Momma! There's water everywhere!”

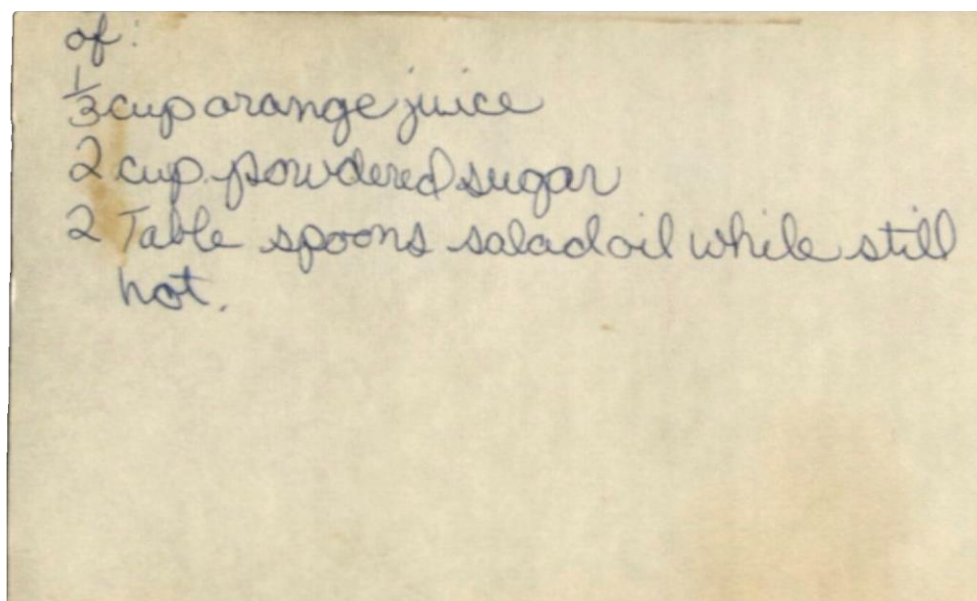
My hand opens and becomes a claw, clinging to the ceramic edge. I'm out of breath by the time I've hoisted myself up. My skin is flecked with tiny black hairs and they make me feel unclean. I scratch at them. The pounding starts.



“Momma, open the door.” Quiet. “Did you fall again?”

I nod in silence. My body glows in the fluorescent light. I am huge and translucent. I melt across the entire floor. Each vein creeps from me and blooms against my paleness, blue and throbbing. My body is spineless, gelatinous, folded, skin stretched thin and wilting. The white door stretches to the ceiling high above me. The doorknob twitches hard. When Jess was still my baby girl she used to write me notes and slide them beneath this bathroom door, thick Crayola scrawl on yellow legal pad paper. Sometimes they were pictures of us, her small, me large. I can still hear her baby voice, even now when she is grown.

“Mmmm- you sick again?” I’d be hanging my head over the toilet so deeply I’d see the inner rim freckled with rust and sludge, the dregs and the smell turning my stomach into liquid. The toothbrush was something cheap, no name brand, plucked from a wicker basket at the dentist’s office. Along the slim handle were the teeth marks, sharp places where I’d bitten down, the plastic now rising up into serrated edges. I had kept the same one for years, my little ritual,



hidden in the medicine cabinet inside a lavender silk pouch meant for lipsticks. If I turned my head, I saw the sliver of light from beneath the door, seeing the shadow of tiny feet. It pushed all of it, the sickly sweet, the yellow cake mix of my insides, what I had filled myself so full of, it pushed it all up until it was right there, choking me.

“Momma, you let me in?” I’d turn the faucet on to drown out the sound of her little knuckles against the door. With enough time she’d bristle, the hunger would turn her into something angry, “You! You said mac and cheese! It’s dinnertime! Now!”

Outside the bathroom Jess is opening and closing things, rifling through drawers, I know her. She slams things: cupboards and oven doors, drawers with silverware that chime when shouldered, chairs against table legs, bedroom doors when she was sixteen, bedroom doors when she was six, car doors now. She’s looking for the skewers but I’ve hidden them in my bedroom, in the nightstand. My mother never let me slam the cupboards like that. “Please Gertie, the wood, the wood.” Jessica will have to track down a bobby pin if she wants in the bathroom. Outside the door I hear her dump out the junk drawer onto the kitchen floor.

My mother lived in the kitchen. She wore a yellow apron cinched at her tiny waist and her little black heels wore against the linoleum, creating a scraped path between the sink and fridge, and back again. She was beautiful. She used to stand with her back to the table, the kitchen faucet running steaming water over congealed meatloaf coated plates. I never saw her eat and even if she did it was a single poached egg for breakfast while my dad devoured thick mounds of biscuits drowned in gravy, a cinnamon roll in each fist.

Sometimes I would fake illness and sprawl across the kitchen floor and whimper about sore throats and upset stomachs. All lies. My mother would stand at the rotary phone and cluck

into it. No, she couldn't make it to her shift. No, one of the younger nurses would have to take her delivery for the day. Gertie was sick again. Yes, again. The fourth time this month.

But my Mother let me crawl into her bed, the pink blanket with the satin edge pulled up under our chins. This was the only way we could be alone together. I'd wrap my arms around her waist so tight sweat would bead up between us. She never complained. This was the only time she got to sleep.

If my mother were here now she would bend down onto her knees and press the back of her hand to my forehead to feel my balmy melted butter skin. I'd reach up to her throat, my fingers running over the choker she wore made of pearls. Her neck would go taut and she'd tighten her jaw at me.

"Gertie, get up" she'd swat at me. "You're fine, stop this. Please. I'm too busy for you. Go make yourself a snack."

My mother was meticulous. She'd measure out cups of sugar and flour with lethal precision. Hours later the house would be filled with the smell of red velvet cake. Sometimes it would be pink champagne, or lemon pound cake, or if I was lucky, Devil's food. When she'd finally cut me a slice, I would dip my hands in and bring out entire fistfuls of soft sweetness. She hated me messy.

The shadow beneath the door wavers. I watch my daughter's steps. I want to fill the room with heat and steam myself alive. Microwave melt me. Peel back my skin and cut a portion out to fill our plates. My pale pulpy skin cut into perfect filets on our white china plates. An extra helping for Jessica.

"Please Momma. Please let me in."

My mouth waters.

February 23 1999

Dear Mother,

Thanks for sending the coupons in the mail. I keep a whole stack of them you sent me, I got one for everything! We could use a new pair of winter boots each. I still make Jess wear the pink light up ones from last year even though she says My Little Pony is for babies. She's a baby! You should hear her talk sometimes, like she's forty or something looking back on her life. We talk about you a lot. Whenever I make her cinnamon toast we talk about how you used to make it for me when I was sick. She likes to hear about me as a kid. I told her about the time I tried to sneak out the basement window but got stuck and Dad came out there with a flashlight in his tighty whities - you were mortified. Looking back now I don't even know where I was trying to go. Dad loved that story.

You probably want to hear about the house. I cleaned out the front porch, it took me days. There was still one of those old tvs with no remote, just dials. I tossed it. Boxes and boxes of romance novels - I didn't even know you read them? I donated them to that Planned Parenthood book sale they have every year down at the fair grounds. There were baby toys of Jess's I just threw out. It looks pretty good now. I put a set of lawn chairs in there - but we don't sit out there much because of the cold. I thought about trading out the screens for glass but I can't afford that right now and I wanted to use the money you gave me for more important stuff like the new carpet in the living room. We pulled up the orange shag and put in the

new green you picked out. Jess laid on it the whole next day saying it reminded her of a lake. We still got the old couch - you remember the plaid one, I know you think its ugly but its still in good shape so I'm not getting rid of it yet.

I hired somebody to fix the sink pipes in the bathroom. You should have seen Jess, she stood in the doorway the whole hour he was here and watched him work. He was probably a little annoyed but I'm paying him, so what's he got to complain about? Anyway, she asked me to buy her a wrench that night at dinner. Can you believe that?

For the kitchen I bought a wallpaper runner for above the cabinets. I put it in myself and everything. It's got a pattern, green and white with flowers. I thought it'd compliment the cupboards real well. The linoleum in the corner by the back door was peeling so I put some super glue under it and stacked some phonebooks on it and now its staying down pretty good. The rest of the money went to the new fridge. I know you thought the stove was looking a little iffy but it was just because I hadn't cleaned it in a while - it works just fine. I'm planning on painting that old dining set but I haven't gotten around to it yet. It'll be done by May, I promise, I remember the stipulations. I know when you last visited you said you were worried about Jess in the house but Mother you have to quit it with that stuff. I'm busy. I've been putting in over forty hours a week. And just because the house is a little dirty doesn't mean my child is in danger. I went ahead and did the things you asked though, because you are right, she deserves to live some place nice.

But Mother, you can't keep giving me money like this. We're fine on our own, I swear. Even if things get tight I can always get a little assistance from the state, I would rather take it from them than you. Go use your retirement money! Dad invested your 401k for a reason, it got a nice return and he's got the nurses. They'll take good care of him, so good he won't even notice you're gone. Go buy a Winnebago and see the country. Haha! I'm laughing about it right now, thinking of you with one of Dad's trucker hats on, navigating route 66. You should come up here during the summer time and park it out back, like Dad used to with the suburban. We can all spend time out at the lake together, just the three of us girls. When was the last time you saw Jess? Easter of last year? She's grown so much you've got to see her. Honestly Mother you worked hard your whole life, please go do something to make yourself happy and stop worrying about us, stop worrying so much about everything. You should come visit soon though - Jess truly misses you. She says she wants you to come over and have a slumber party with her! What a funny girl.

Love, Gertie

P.S. Please don't write me anything about politics or the impeachment trials. I know, I voted for him. I know how you feel about it mother. No sense in arguing.

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“What would people say about me?”

Momma says Grandma is a mean old bird. MEAN OL’ BIRD. Just like that. But she doesn’t mean like a real bird, not like with feathers and stuff, but like a saying. Like a saying like “doubt it” or “raining cats and dogs”. Only grown ups say, “doubt it”, you ever even hear a kid say “doubt it”? No. But I do say raining cats and dogs because I like that one, just think, whole cats and whole dogs coming like rain. So no, Grandma isn’t a bird, but I don’t really get the saying anyway because how is a Grandma even like a bird?

A bird can’t drive the Buick to pick you up on a Sunday afternoon and take you shopping. It can’t buy you French fries in the food court either. But picture it anyway, me sitting across from a giant frickin bird eating off those plastic trays like the plastic trays at school, but different and better because it’s not school.

I sit and wait on my knees and watch out the window on the screen door. She could be coming around the corner in *five, four, three, two, one, one half*, okay never mind, now, *five, four, three, two and three quarters*, I been waiting all frickin day. I keep trying to time it – see if I can make her come here faster. I prolly can.

Momma said we gotta be up and ready by noon for the ol’ bird. Gotta have hair brushed with the mean brush, even though it hurts. No rats. Gotta have layers on, Grandma is always saying I’m cold when I’m not, gotta have layers. Gotta go run out to Grandma’s car before she parks so she doesn’t come inside. Momma says don’t give her a reason to come inside, just go out instead. Just go right out and jump in the front seat and take off to the mall. Give Momma time to get the house right. It’s not right yet, not all the stuff that sposta be done. Not the carpet cleaned, not the pipes fixed, the plumber guy came but they still aren’t right, Momma says,

cheap bastard, Momma says. Gotta make sure the ol' bird doesn't know about cheap bastard plumbers and the finger-paint stains on the carpet.

It had been an accident, really, the paper was so light, like Bible pages, it just soaked right through. Momma said I shoulda been using watercolors but she never buys me watercolors, I just got the squeezey tubes from the dollar store that always get clogged with dried up paint, and you squeeze so hard on 'em and then forty frickin gallons come pouring out all over your frickin Bible page papers and then Grandma is mad, because god damn it, she paid good money to put the new carpet in. Mean ol' bird.

Momma says the drive is long down from Rochester, long drive for a Grandma, especially a Grandma who hates long drives, gets stiff legs, gets tired of doing nothing in the car, these things are hard for a Grandma. That's why we gotta be extra sweet, be extra nice, smile lots, talk nice and quiet, sit nice too, cross our legs, not say frickin, brush our hair, even do stuff we wouldn't normally do in a million years - like put on tights. I got two pairs of underwear on today, one under the tights and one on top, that way they don't fall down. See, nice- wear two pairs of underwear for your Grandma, that's what I mean, that's being sweet. I'm pretty sweet anyway but this is a different type of sweet, this is doing exactly as Grandma wants. It's all for Momma though. It hurts her, you know, when Grandma is mean. Hurts her real bad, like lock-the-bathroom-door-bad, or sleep-all-day-on-Saturday,-even-though-you-promised-to-play-Barbies-bad.

She's in the kitchen now, scrubbing up on dishes from last night. I said I would do it but Momma says I always get my shirts all soaked, so I can't. I can hear the water running though and it makes my stomach feel funny. All tight and bad. I could tell Grandma I got a stomach ache and that she should just drive home. But then maybe she'll wanna come in and visit. I can't

frickin win, I tell ya. That's what Momma says, "Jesus, I just need a win today. Please." But she doesn't actually mean win, not goals or trophies, just a little something good.

I press my fist against the fogged up glass on the screen door and leave little curled marks. Mrs. Anjie taught us that at after school. You add little dots, five of em' and then it's a baby foot. I'm so busy making baby feet I don't even see the Buick pull up.

"She is here!" I scream over my shoulder and jump through the door, out onto the porch. I run as fast as I can to the car door and throw it open. Remember, gotta get in quick. The leather is buttery. Grandma is wringing her wrists in front of the little heater blower.

"Hi Grandma!" I give my biggest most hard smile. Her eyes crinkle a little.

"Jessica, my girl. You're getting so big!" Grandma wears her hair in a perm. I know this because she sleeps with a silk pillowcase and one time I asked why and she told me. Today her grey hair looks perfect and solid. I wanna slide my pinky finger inside one of those perfect circles.

"I don't feel any bigger" I tell her, pulling my buckle on. This makes her laugh but I don't really know why.

"What grade are you in?"

Grandma turns in her seat. I think we gotta get going before she gets an idea, like needing to use the bathroom inside, or wanting to see school pictures, or something like that.

"Third. I'm real excited to go shopping today." She nods her head and puts her hand on the stick shift. I let out a big breath.

"Me too. I love spending time with you. Why isn't your mother coming with us?" I gotta get her off it.

“We better get going. Saturdays are real busy at Southridge. We gotta make sure we can get a parking spot.” Grandma nods her head gently and the car rolls slowly backwards. “Once Momma took me, and we had to drive around like crazy looking for a spot.” That’s a lie. Momma is super good at finding spots right by the door. She calls it VIP parking. And also Southridge is a ghost town, that’s what Momma says. Waldenbooks closed a lot of weeks ago and we came to get 70% off. The lie burns my stomach a little but I heal it with another hard smile.

“We better hurry then!”

Grandma’s car is way nicer than Momma’s car. Really it’s the nicest car I have ever been inside. It’s gold on the outside and the inside even has a cd slot. Our car just has cassette spots. Grandma is always listening to talk radio. I can hear their voices now, real low, she’s got it turned down now. I bet it was real loud when she was driving though. I listen for half a second as she pulls the wheel hard to turn us around. They’re talking about *eye rack*, eye rack, they say it lots, I don’t even know what an eye rack is. Maybe a place to put glasses.

“I was planning on coming down last summer but couldn’t make it, you know with Grandpa and all.” Grandpa isn’t a person, he’s a robot. That’s what Momma says. They only let me see him one time and yeah, I agree. He’s got all these tubes and blinking screens around him. Robots need constant supervision, I think. I nod so Grandma knows I understand this.

“I am very happy you are here now.” Her eyes look soft and watery. “I’m glad we’re getting going too!” I add for good measure so she doesn’t get any funny ideas about turning around. Just in case, I think. We take streets because Grandma gets nervous on the highway. Driving real fast is another thing that is hard for grandmas.

“How is the house coming along?” This makes me choke a little but I disguise it with a cough. The car windows are filled with lots of grey, sidewalk and the sky. I pull on my skirt and turn my chin to my shoulder.

“Uhh, real good. Yeah.” Another frickin lie. It tastes so bad on my tongue. It makes my teeth hurt. I could tell her Momma is at home tidying up, tidying sounds little and neat and not like the giant work she’s actually doing. But maybe saying anything at all will look suspicious. I bite down on my cheek. I find a truth and this feels like a hug. “I love the color of the new carpet.” Grandma smirks and watches the stoplight we’re stuck at.

“Your mother wrote me a letter and told me that.” Now I feel like it wasn’t good enough, like she already knew so I gotta give her something else but I don’t know what. I dig my fists into the seat underneath me.

“It’s coming along real nice, all together.” This feels like just enough and the breath comes out fast from my mouth. She is smiling that little happy Grandma smile. You know, Grandmas are treats because you don’t get to have them all year. Some kids at school have Grandmas who pick them up every Friday or send them rice crispy treats – but my Grandma is like Christmas or Easter and sometimes even more rare than that. Yeah, it makes me miss her real bad but it’s a good kind of missing. Also because she is so far away it is way easier to keep Momma safe from her. Imagine if she lived here, I’d be doing this kinda stuff every day. That gives me a big worry. This is a lot of work for a kid who is just barely a third grader, only three months in. Jesus frickin heck.

“I wish your Grandpa could see you now. He would have loved you.” We pass over the river and it is dirty and fast.

“Robots can love?”

Her face spins toward me fast, so fast it makes my heart wobble. “Jessica Marie, what are you talking about?”

“Well, like, you said Grandpa, and you know, Grandpa is a robot so-” She turns her face back to the road and I think I said a wrong thing, or maybe a bad thing, or worse what Momma calls an offensive thing that can really hurt someone’s feelings. Yeah, maybe you say someone’s birthday is in January when its actually February and that might make em’ a little sad, but asking an old lady her age or calling someone the R word - that’s like totally frickin’ offensive.

“Where’d you get that from? Your Grandfather isn’t a robot. That’s absurd. Who told you that? He’s- he’s just- he’s sick.” Okay, this must have been really offensive because Grandma’s voice is doing that shakey thing that Momma’s voice does when the *arms of the angels* dog commercial comes on. I gotta stop this.

“Please pull the car over.”

“What? Jessica-”.

“I think I’m gonna be sick Grandma, please pull the car over.”

She pulls off into a parking lot and I throw the door open. I can feel the sweat on my back. Down in the ditch there is long grass. I bend over and put my hands on my knees. I’ve got my back to her so she can’t see that I’m really not puking at all.

“Jesse, you okay sweetie?” I take a second and close my eyes super tight. The world feels wonky.

“Yeah, yeah! I’m fine.” I wait there and then come back up to the car. She’s got a concerned teacher face. She hands me a plastic water bottle with only a little bit left in it.

“Rinse your mouth out.” I turn my back to her and gargle the warm water and spit it into the yellow grass. I can’t believe Momma made me wear tights today, I prolly look so dumb. I

climb back into the passenger seat and buckle myself in again. Grandma stares at me but I keep my eyes on the windshield. Finally she turns the car around and pulls back onto the street.

“Are you sure you’re okay? Are you feeling well? Did you eat something bad?” I shake my head.

“I just get car sick.” I tell her. This feels like less of a lie, because yeah, I do get car sick, like actually super bad. But I never get carsick in the front seat, only in the back.

“Oh dear, your mother did too when she was your age.”

There is a big silence and I tip my head back. Please no more talking. We pass motels and Storage Mart and the mini-golf place.

“Jesse honey, what were you saying about your Grandfather? Before?” I let my eyelids close and I think hard, like brain blast hard.

“Uh, like, I was just feeling so sick. I was confused. It was the car sickness talking.” I am impressed with myself. Momma used to say “take a bow” when I was little and did my ABC’s perfect or made an awesome jump off the swing. This is a “take a bow” thing. Grandma nods and has one of those little tight smiles but she still looks a little nervous or something. It isn’t my fault, okay. It’s Momma’s fault. She’s the one who said Grandpa isn’t a real person anymore, how was I sposta know it was an offensive thing to say?

Far away past the McDonalds I can see the mall. The parking lot is empty. I feel bad. Grandma doesn’t say anything. Instead she finds a spot by Target and parks the Buick real slow. When we go inside she reaches out her hand for me to hold. The cross walk is chipped and old. Her hand is warm and dry. When we cross through the doors the warm air blows my hair backwards.

“Lets go to the café. I need a coffee. Do you want anything?” I nod. I know exactly what I want. When the teenager takes our order, Grandma asks for a little room in her coffee for milk, and the teenager says they don’t have any milk, and that makes Grandma do that throat noise and she rolls her eyes. I try to smile big at the teenager to help her feel better cause Grandma was a little mean but the girl doesn’t notice me. I ask for a cherry slurpee. We find an empty red table. Grandma won’t let me sit down until she’s wiped it off with paper napkins, even the chairs.

“Let me try that,” I slide my paper cup across the table. Grandma takes the tiniest sip of all time. “Oh lord, Jesse that’s terrible.” At first I find that a little offensive but then I start laughing and I can’t stop and Grandma laughs too. We have tiny happy laugh tears in the corners of our eyes and I can see where the slurpee stained Grandma’s lips pink and that makes me feel happy.

Next she gets an idea about clothes. Let me be honest, I really hate trying on clothes. I think just buy it, okay? If it doesn’t fit take it back and return it or something. Grandma doesn’t agree with me though even when I hold up the hanger to my body and try and prove to her it’s big enough.

“No, no, no. Little miss, you’re trying it on. You can’t even tell if it fits.”

“Yes I can.”

“No you can’t, c’mon now.” Grandma has like twenty frickin shirts and pants and dresses hangin’ on the edge on the cart. And she wants me to try them all on? Jesus frickin heck. Momma says this is Grandma’s way to show love though, buying things, so you gotta just do it. Just do it. I can’t wait till I’m big and I can tell kids to *just do it*.

Grandma picks me a room and I think she’ll come in with me while I try stuff on, but then she just shuts the door and leaves me inside. Momma never does that. I feel a little weird.

“Try the jeans and the sweaters first.” Her voice is close to the door, like she’s talking into the crack. If I turn my head over I can see her white sneakers underneath the edge of the door. I take off my sweater and fold it nice, then my skirt too. I gotta figure out how to fold tights, they are kinda shaped weird.

“You ready to show me yet?” I’m gonna barf I think. Jesus heck this is too much. I barely got my clothes off.

“No!” I think my voice was louder than I meant it to be, but I’m thinking about what if she opens the door, and everybody out there in the aisle sees me all almost naked, that’d be like, the baddest most embarrassing thing to happen in history to me. Now I gotta go like really fast.

The sweater is fine, but I can’t button the jeans. In the mirror my tummy looks like a lumpy, round, white meatball. Frick. I feel sweaty. I gotta ask for a bigger size, but I don’t wanna because I don’t want Grandma to think I’m fat, or something. I pull the sweater over the jeans and leave them unbuttoned and open the door.

“Yeah, so, uh, all fits fine.” I turn my back to her and look into the mirror. The sweater is purple and my cheeks are hot pink. Grandma turns me around and checks the length of the sleeves. Then she bends down to pull on the ankle of the jeans.

“Looks good, Jess.” She reaches two hooked fingers to my waist, and I wanna like jump away, or fall on the ground, or yell or something so she doesn’t notice, but she gets to me first.

“Jessica, these pants don’t even button.”

“Oh, oops. I didn’t even notice that.” The lies are like, choking me, I think because my voice comes out squeaky. She turns me around hard and checks the back tag, then stands up quick and takes the other jeans off the hook.

“I’m going to get bigger sizes of each, and you can try them.” I close the door hard behind her, and lock it. Mean ol’ bird. I stand in the mirror and pull the sweater up over my tummy. My belly button is deep and round. I grab all my skin and push it together, squeezing it. First I just push it down so it looks flat in the mirror, but then I grab it hard, so hard it hurts bad. I wanna rip it off. I wanna chop it off. I hate it. I suck in hard and try to button the jeans. They don’t go. Stupid. I lay down on the chair, my head hanging off one side and legs danglin’ on the other. Momma does this trick. You lay on a bed, or something flat, and you suck in and squash with all your might, and button it, so you’re all sucked in. I get it, but when I stand up it hurts me. But it frickin fits, okay.

“Jessica, I’m back. Open the door sweetie.” I never want to open the door again. She should stay out there away from me forever. I get prickly tears in the back of my eyeballs and I know for sure I can’t open the door until I get those stopped. “Jess?” I press my face against the mirror because its cold and I’m hot all over. “Jessica are you still in there? Open the door please.” I am real quiet, not really because I want her to think I’m gone but just cause I gotta take big deep breaths, that’s what Momma says to do, in out, in out. And then we start the day over, we end the bad stuff, and start new. She tries the doorknob again and it jiggles hard.

“Sorry, I wasn’t feeling super good. The slurpee, and the car, and everything.” Grandma steps through the door once I’ve opened it, and puts the back of her hand on my forehead.

“You don’t feel hot. Are you okay now? Do you want to go home?” I do wanna go home. But I can’t go home because I’m sposta distract Grandma as long as possible so Momma has as long as possible to clean the house.

“No, I’m fine. I promise.” Grandma’s face looks crinkly and sad like she could cry or something, but I don’t know why she would cry, she’s perfectly fine, I’m the one with the

stressful life of distraction, and trying on clothes, and having to tell like a billion lies. “Look Grandma, they fit.” I pull up my sweater to reveal my pressed in tummy. I am a little proud.

“Oh Jess, sweetie. Try these, please. They’ll be more comfortable. Don’t you wanna be comfortable?” Yes I frickin do and at least she didn’t say anything about my bigness because then I woulda lost it, not like lose a thing, but like then the tears would really come, but she is nice to me, and I needed that. She leaves the new jeans on the hook and closes the door. At first when I look at them I think they look giant, and I hope they don’t fit, because if the giant pants fit, that’s embarrassing. But when I put them on and they button so easy, and even have a little extra room, and they stretch way more than regular jeans. I can even pull them up over my tummy. Everything else goes quick and easy and Grandma gives my outfits ten outa ten, every single one, even the *My Little Pony* shirt, which I hate. That’s the only thing we decide not to buy.

“There you go, nice good winter clothes.” Grandma is nodding and smiling again. Next we go to Younkers just for her. She wants to look at the skirts and blazers. I am relieved because guess what, this means I don’t have to try anything on, she can do all the work. This time she lets me come into the dressing room while she tries stuff on. She finds a combination set, that’s what she calls it, a light blue combination set. She tries it on and I see all of her saggy skin, it’s like freckly and loose. She wears white tights all the time, always, under her pants. They compress her, yeah, that’s what I think she said, make her look like a ballerina or something. The combination set fits real good, but she wants to try an eight because a six is a little stiff in the shoulders, so she tries the eight but its too long, and she wishes she could put the top of the eight with the bottom of the six and all of this makes me feel exhausted, okay.

“Jessica, I need to ask you something. Have you spoken to your father?” Grandma is turning in the mirror and I’m laying on the hard carpeted floor. Uhh, this has gotta be a trick question, okay. I don’t got a dad. I’m just my Momma’s – that’s what she says. Grandma should know this, right? I never even came from a dad. I don’t wanna make a problem like earlier though.

“Nope.” Grandma sighs in the mirror and changes the jackets of the combination set for like the ninetieth time.

“Do you know if he pays child support? I know your mother doesn’t like to talk about what happened, but if you need to talk about it, I am here for you, sweetie. You’re getting older now...” She stops and reaches her hands to unzip the skirt. I think she’s just saying stuff. None of this makes any sense to me, I don’t even got a clue. Momma says sometimes old people forget stuff, maybe Grandma is just remembering the wrong stuff.

“It’s almost been four years since he left. I can’t believe he did that to your mother. I didn’t even really get to know him, that’s when your grandfather was having all those complications, I never had time to come down here.” Okay, this is like really stressing me out. Nothing happened four years ago. Nothing at all. Nobody left. I never had a dad from the very beginning, I just had a mom, like how baby Jesus just had a mom and no dad, just an adopted dad, Joseph. I don’t even got an adopted dad, okay! Grandma has all her regular clothes back on finally. “Now that I think about it, I never did meet him. Your mother just talked about him in letters and sent photos of him.” She looks in the mirror for a long time. I’m tired of her saying all this dumb stuff that confuses me.

I wanna go home. But we can’t go home yet because Grandma wants to walk around. We smell candles and squeeze pillows, we try on pearls and big heavy bottles of perfume. I feel like

we walked a million steps by the time we come back to Target to leave. It's dark outside a little bit and Grandma holds my hand again when we go to the car. This time she puts on the radio and I sing a little and it makes everything a little better. Grandma doesn't really know the words but she smiles and shimmies her shoulders in her seat, and that makes me laugh, like big inside my tummy, so hard it hurts. I think geez, this was more than enough time for Momma, right?

When we get home Grandma gives me my bags to take to my room. There is tons of clothes in the plastic sacks. I flop onto my bed and pull the pillow under my face. I know Grandma is going to the kitchen to talk with Momma. Today was so hard, okay. I just wanna watch SpongeBob and eat swoops. It was a bad time, Grandpa robot arguments, dad questions, Jesus frickin heck man. I wanna ask Momma a bunch of questions but I don't wanna make her upset, don't wanna make her feel bad like Grandma does, but I really gotta know.

Through the walls I hear it start. At first it's just a few sharp peeps, but then their voices get louder. Grandma sounds like a witch, big and angry. Momma has her crying voice on but every few words she sounds less sad and instead really mad. I bite down on my comforter. It tastes dry. I shove it farther into my mouth. I put my hands over my ears. They keep going. Something slams, someone screams, not like a scared scream but a frustrated stubbed toe scream. I get a good idea, the best distraction of all time, to end it, to protect Momma.

I get up and tiptoe into the living room, it's louder out here and I can see around the corner into the kitchen. Grandma is standing under the light with her arms crossed.

"I passed this damn house onto you - the least you could do is take care of it. Don't you know it hurts me? To see it like this? Decrepit! Gertie, what would your father say?"

"He wouldn't say anything mother, he's a vegetable! It's always about the house, about keeping up appearances, I'm trying, okay? I'm really trying!"

In the corner by the front door is a bookshelf. It is real dusty now and stuffed with lots of old baby VHS tapes that we barely watch anymore. I climb the shelves real careful so I don't make any noise.

"Don't talk about your father that way."

"I wasn't trying to, I just - what about me and Jess, here? What about us, Mother? Why can't you just be with us? Aren't we enough?"

"This, all of this, is for Jessica! And I'm doing what I'm supposed to do, Gertrude. What would people say if I just left your father to rot in a nursing home? What would they say about me?"

The floor feels very far away. From up here I can spot the paint stains on the carpet by the couch though, they stand out bright and splotchy. I close my eyes really hard and think about quietness, about Momma and me in bed on Saturday mornings watching *That's So Raven* and snuggling. Then I jump.

I hear myself scream but it's not really me. It hurts all over, especially my head and shoulder. Momma and Grandma are running now, I can feel the floor shaking.

"Jessica?"

"Jess baby, what happened?"

I hope I broke my arm.

“This wasn’t supposed to be so serious.”

The rain is loud against the windshield. It blurs the crack that runs along the bottom – the one that has been widening every winter. I lean forward and run my pointer finger over it, half hoping it will cut me. I look out across the parking lot for his car but I can’t find anything. The world is wet and shiny. The white light from the Walmart sign burns metallic, pewter and sterling, everything liquid, a place turned mercury. He gets off at ten and then finally I will be able to go in. Hopefully I will catch him walking out to his blue beater and peeling away, just to be sure he’s gone. I like to be sure. I tug at a loose thread on my sweater. This one was a dollar sixty-five at the Goodwill, I bought it because I didn’t have anything clean to wear. I pick at it, unraveling the burgundy string even though I like it. I wind it around my pinky six times and then release it. I tug it down over my hips. Ground beef, half a gallon of 2%, string cheese, frozen burritos, formula, pizza bagels, and slim fast. I couldn’t find my notebook so I just gotta keep saying it, gotta keep it up there in my head.

Inside the car my ashtray is filled with dirty pennies, I dig my fingers into them. They are warped and textured. I contemplate drawing out a fistful so I can count them just to waste the time. I keep old silver necklaces, ones from gumball machines on the rearview. But my favorite thing is a long chunk of crystal on a piece of fishing line that I made myself. I spin it between my thumb and forefinger and then open my palm and let it twist and orbit. It rotates six times before slowing to a lull. I do it again. There is a crushed paper cup on the floor of the passenger’s seat, a dirty shoe mark over the teal and purple logo. I want to throw it out, but not here, need a trash can, but don’t want to carry it in the store either. Better wait till I get home. Maybe I’ll put it in a grocery bag so I don’t have to carry it separate. Ground beef, half a gallon of 2%, string cheese. I should make cinnamon rolls. Need shortening. I reach and pop open the glove box. There are

napkins and a half empty pack of 100's. I tried to stop when I had Jess, cut down to only two a day, now I only smoke 'em when she's not in the car with me.

I check the rearview and see her little round face. Her neck is bent sideways hard, it makes me wince. How can she sleep like that? I turn on my knees, my pants tug against the upholstery. I press my fingertip to her forehead and tip her head backwards; her mouth falls open to reveal little empty pink gums. I run my knuckle over her chin to wipe away the drool, cleaning it with my sweater. I worry if the knit rubs her skin too raw, if it hurts her. Formula, forgot formula, slim fast, pizza bagels, shortening.

I pivot back and fall against the steering wheel. I hit the horn with my behind and Jess stirs violently, her little arms rising about her head, eyelids barely splitting open. I can feel the embarrassment painting my face pink. Stupid. Dummy dummy dummy. Thankfully the parking lot is so dark and soaked no one can see into my Saturn, even if they wanted to. Jess melts back into sleep. I check the clock, 9:52. If it was 10:00 or 10:05 I would have been screwed because then he probably would have been walking out to his car after his shift and heard the horn, he would have cocked his head over here and seen my car, seen the fogged up windows, walked over here and seen Jess, for fucks sake!

Ground beef, string cheese, baby formula, and damn it! He would have circled around to the passenger's side. He would have knocked, covering his face with his blue smock. His eyes would say "for old times sake?" and I would have to leave. I would have to just drive away. I would have to leave him there standing in the rain and then he would probably start calling. He would probably leave messages right away.

"G, why'd you run off on me like that last night?"

"C'mon G, answer the phone. I haven't seen you in nearly a year."

The curiosity would kill him, I know. Right now I'm at the back of his head, I'm somewhere down deep, a place he barely thinks about. Just the idea of something distant and familiar. But if I drove off like that I'd be right up front and center, I'd be a question mark, I'd be the chorus to a song, "*What is love, baby don't hurt me, don't hurt me, no more.*" I'd be the next lyric he couldn't remember, so he'd sing it in his head all the time and it would get so annoying he would have to finish it, he'd have to come for me. He'd think of me all the time, he'd think about the back seat of my car, and my pot roast, and the Sunday mass I never make it to anymore.

Then he'd show up at the house. He'd knock on my goddamn door. I'd have to stand at the porch window and watch, my fingers spreading open the blinds until he left. I'd have to turn off all the lights and pretend like I wasn't home. But he would keep trying, you know. He'd come once a week for a few weeks, but then it would get bad. Eventually he'd come everyday. That means I'm turning off the lights and lying on the floor every damn day. Turning off the TV and holding my hand over Jess's face when she cries. But you know what, one day he'd time it just right. Maybe he would call one of the girls at the post office and get my shift. Then he'd stake out in his Mazda, and wait for me to come home, and he'd jump out at the last second and rush up to me at the door, and I know his eyes would look crazy because after a girl leaves you alone in the rain in a parking lot and doesn't answer the phone or the door for six weeks it would make you pretty crazy. And then I'd have to move. I'd have to pack my bags and leave because what else would there be to do?

But thank Jesus, it wasn't 10:00 or 10:05 it was 9:52 and he was still working and Jess was still asleep and thankfully my little embarrassment burned up too quick for anyone to see. Thank Jesus. I press my palm to the steering wheel against the horn and inhale. Thank the lord

Jesus. I have to hold my wrist hard so I don't press the horn again because something weird in my body makes me want to. I don't want him to see me. Not right now. Not with all the extra weight, extra jelly that Jess had left on me after she was born. Not with my face looking like a big wide white moon. Damn, spaghetti, didn't even think to remember that. When I was pregnant all I wanted was buckets and buckets of pasta, I wanted loads of red sauce.

Jess's face is calm in the mirror. Little tufts of brown downy hair stand up along her translucent skull. I can't believe how delicate she is. Sometimes I can't believe she came out of my body, something so damn pretty.

I absentmindedly reach my hand into my purse sitting on the passenger's seat and pluck out a handful of Atomic Fireballs. They make my tongue almost sizzle. I fold the wrapper into squares and run my nail along the seam. Its 10:01 and I need spaghetti, ground beef, 2%, formula, slim fast and pizza bagels.

He always said, "I'm not a serious type of guy, what's the point in being serious? We're just hanging out, right G? Everyone else is serious enough for the both of us, G. We're doing just fine."

And I would nod and turn molten inside because yes, I would be unserious for him, hell I would be downright silly. We never talked about OJ Simpson or the World Trade Center bombing. We did talk about Alice in Chains and Ren and Stimpy because he really liked to talk about those things. He'd do impressions of Forrest Gump and make me laugh so hard my belly ached. When we spread out in the backseat together he would grab my ankles and tickle my feet so hard I would kick and scream. We'd sit together in this parking lot after he got off work and wait for all the cars to clear out. Under the lampposts his acne scars would soften. He didn't like

to go home, and I just liked to be the girl he was not serious with, in the parking lot after work when he didn't wanna go home yet.

It is 10:11. I must be safe. I climb from my car and pop open my seat. It takes maneuvering to pull the car seat out of my two-door. Jess is awake by the time I unearth her. Her eyes are huge and shocked, offended by the cold night air. The rain is just barely spitting at us now. Formula, milk, ground beef, string cheese, slim fast, pizza bagels, spaghetti. The building is bright, a burning beacon in the night. They close in two hours. I know the aisles will be empty except for stockers. I locate each stop in my brain before I pass through the sliding glass doors, east wall for meat, back corner for dairy, frozen food catty-corner from that. This way I don't have to look up often, I can just keep my face low. The real problem with having a baby is how often people want to stop you and tell you how pretty it is. Then you have to be polite and smile and nod and make small talk. You have to actually look at their faces and see crows feet and moles and yellow teeth, you have to think about them looking back at you and seeing your big white wide moon face.

I pause in the baby aisle and brush my hands over little pink onesies. Mother sends me boxes full, real nice ones because otherwise I have to dress Jess in thrift'd ones. Nothing wrong with that, but Mother can't have it. She thinks he lives with us, she thinks he is helping to pay the bills, she thinks he's a great father to Jess, she thinks all of these things because I lie to her. I can imagine the revelation in my gut and heat sweeps up my throat. I am drowning for a second I think, the air turned thick and soupy with shame. I told my mother he picked out the name Jessica, named her after his sister who passed when he was a kid. But I did it, I named her, she's just mine. The lies are expanding now, filling the world with marshmallow foam. Pretty soon they will swallow me and Jess both. Milk, formula, ground beef, pizza bagels, shortening for

cinnamon rolls. I'm holding a rosy pair of footy pajamas so hard my knuckles are white. When they pulled Jess out of my body, I had wanted to hug her so tight, I wanted to hurt her a little just to make sure she was real. That's how I feel now.

I remember how it started. He'd nudged my chin and whispered "C'mon G, I had such a long night, help a fella out". The car turned into molasses and I hung outside of my own body, just hovering. I watched myself, I watched my mouth and my open jaw. I watched his eyes rolls backwards. We didn't really talk about that either. But it all kept happening. One night, once it had gotten real late, pitch black outside the windows - he peeled off my jeans and folded them neatly over the headrest. This time I was inside my body, this time it was him who melted me, turned me into vapor, sweet cotton candy tendrils, something filled with air and love. I had given myself little lilac and lemonade colored bruises on my big pale thighs, perfect thumbprint sized pinches. He kissed these.

Jess whines in her seat. She knows I am not really here anymore and that scares her. I wander to the check out feeling anxious, desperate, ready to leave this place. I had things to accomplish. I had a grocery list. This wasn't supposed to be so serious. I play Tetris with my items along the conveyor belt, arranging them perfectly before they arrive in the cashier's hands. The blue smock hangs on his slender shoulders. A stupid little yellow smiley looks back at me from his collarbone. I want to reach out and grab it.

"Evening ma'am. Find everything alright?"

Something stutters in my throat. His nametag. It's *his* nametag. It is *his* name. I whisper it, holding it in my mouth.

"Peter"

"What was that, Miss?"

I point a finger to his smock. He laughs one of those big relieved laughs.

“Oh Petey. Yeah. I’m new, just started a week ago on Friday. They haven’t ordered mine in yet. He loaned me his.”

He reads me, something awkward grows between us. I want to ask so he answers for me.

“Real shame about the guy. I really liked him. Can’t believe he just took off like that”.

The scanner beeps as he moves my items across it’s red reflective mouth. He looks nervous.

“Can’t blame him though. I’ve always wanted to leave here, see the world and shit.”

I nod sharply, probably too quickly. And then I fracture, and then I am water spigot bursting, I am scarlet and the scream is wedged there inside my throat and I can’t turn it off. God damn it, did I get the frozen burritos? Yes, yes, they are here, encased in a filmy white bag. I turn toward him and my mouth is full of bees and truth.

“This is Peter’s baby,” I motion toward Jess who now looks baffled, a revelation even to her. “Me and him, we were in love. Not like a serious kind of love but we used to sit out in the car every night and talk, and he made me really laugh, you know.” Suddenly I can tell the cashier is young, the stubble on his chin looks wispy and juvenile. He swallows hard.

“And you know I never even got the chance to tell him. I was ashamed, okay. He was always saying not to make things too serious and I went and did the most serious thing. I got pregnant. What a dummy.” A strangled chortle comes out of me.

The check boy looks at Jess. His mouth opens but only a little puff of air passes through his lips. My hands tighten on the cart handle. The humiliation makes the whole world explode in painful burning white light. It swallows everything. I look him in the eye and smile.

“Can you tell me where to find the Slim Fast? I think I must have forgotten it.”

EASY REFRIGERATOR ROLLS

2 cups warm water	2 tsp. salt
(not hot—110°—115°)	6½ to 7 cups flour
2 pkg. active dry yeast	1 egg
½ cup sugar	½ cup soft shortening

1. In mixing bowl, dissolve yeast in warm water.
2. Add sugar, salt and half the flour. Beat thoroughly 2 min.
3. Add egg, shortening. Mix in remaining flour with spoon or hand until dough is easy to handle.
4. Place greased side up in greased bowl. Cover bowl with plastic bag or aluminum foil. Place in refrigerator. Punch down occasionally as dough rises.
5. About 2 hours before baking, cut off amount needed and return rest of dough to refrigerator. Shape while cold into desired rolls or coffee cake. Cover and let rise until double in size, 1½ to 2 hours.
6. Bake as directed for each type. This recipe makes about 4 dozen rolls or 2 coffee cakes. (This dough will keep 4 to 5 days in the refrigerator.)

Cinnamon Rolls

Roll dough into oblong, 15x9". Spread with 2 T. softened butter & sprinkle with ½ cup sugar & 2 T. cinnamon. roll up tightly & cut 1" thick. Place in well-greased pan. Cover and let rise until doubled ~~20~~ to ~~40~~ min. 375°

“Well damn, buy them yourself then.”

8:46 PM. We close at 10. But then I’ve got dishes to do, tables to wipe down, and floors mop. Only 2 and a 1/2 more hours? That’s internet plus almost the whole gas bill. Plus 4 hours. That would equal the entire water bill. Plus 45ish minutes. Minus 5 because I clocked in late. All together 7 hours and twenty minutes. That adds up to like 60 bucks? Right? Before taxes. That’s half of the electric. Water is the one they are always trying to turn off. They leave little lime green hangers on the front door knob if I’m 3 days late. Momma finds them and tapes them to my bedroom door. I rip them into long shreds and leave them in the kitchen trash can. You can put the electric off for 4 weeks before they come knocking. But there is a \$2.65 fee when you do. And I pay it every damn time.

“Your total is \$4.62, first window please.” Now that we’ve got 2 drive thrus the camera snaps pictures of the cars so we know who got what. It’s only happened once that both cars were silver Pontiacs. This chick wants a McDougle and a frappe. I heard the baristas at Starbucks hate when customers ask for Vanilla Bean Frappes. “Its Frappuccino, we’re not fucking McDonalds.” My hands are hot and the nickels are cold. I just cracked a new roll.

8:52 PM. They put a camera in the corner back here. My manager says it’s to watch out the window, for like people who might hold us up. But one night when we were slow as shit on an overnight I got up there and looked in the monitor. It doesn’t even show the drive thru window. It’s literally only on the register. Now whenever I look at it, like random, I wanna flip it off. I don’t.

I’m fucking beat. I asked for a new mat back here so my feet wouldn’t hurt so bad. They buy the cheapy ones from the Dollar Store down the street and they’re flat after like 4 days. I’m on my period too and I keep having to ask Lunachick to wear the headset to check my pad. I

didn't come up with the name, okay, Aaron did. I know it's mean. But it's been so long now, and he said it so many times it's like stuck in my brain. I know she gets all anxious and always has to make customers repeat their orders and old people don't like that. She can't help it. Aaron was so much better at headset. Better than me even.

My phone won't stop vibrating in my back pocket. 8:54 PM. I know it's him. He probably needs a ride somewhere. Since he got fired he's always forgetting my shift times. I can't take it out and check though because my stupid ass manager put this blue basket in the back office and we have to put our phones in there if we "can't handle" being off them. The camera's light blinks red all fucking day. When we're super slow I count the blinks, or if I'm really freaking bored I try to do something every time it blinks, like tap the register, or walk my fingers across the red and white flecked countertop. My phone vibrates again.

60 bucks. That's a weeks worth groceries, only if I go to Aldi. I went with Aaron this morning before work, and we just got the stuff Momma and I really needed. Frozen pizzas, lunch meat, and breakfast donuts. 3 frozen dinners for me. Aaron bought 2 bottles of wine. They were only 4\$ a piece. But they sucked because they actually tasted like wine wine. I poured my glass down the kitchen sink while Aaron was in the bathroom. He carried the clinking bottles home in his backpack. Before I come in the house with Aaron I have to ring the doorbell 9 times. Momma says 9 is enough for her to put herself away. But I do 9 and then I count to 30 in my head. Just for her. After we got home and put the groceries away I put on Netflix – Family Guy. We just let it play. I was so tired from running around I fell asleep there – on the plaid upholstered couch before my afternoon shift. I kept trying to wake myself up, catch myself snoring, I didn't wanna be annoying but I must have knocked out. He shook me awake, I didn't even really know I was

asleep, I felt like I was half there. But I must have really been out because I was slumped over his chest, fucking drooling on the Nirvana t-shirt he stole from HotTopic.

“Why didn’t you wake me up? Jesus Christ”. I’d wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. He pointed a hand toward my mom’s open bedroom, his eyes huge and excited. I lurched onto my feet. The door was only open a foot, just the corner of her bed peaking out. The bare mattress was piled with blankets, I could see the old shredded pink one. The wall behind the door was illuminated with the glow of the TV. I felt my heart behind my eyelids. She must have forgotten he was here. She must have heard our voices stop. Fuck. If he saw her, she’d – I don’t know, it’s never happened before, but the idea of it made my whole body sweat. She’s like a lightning rod.

“Momma? Aaron’s here.”

I didn’t even get to press my hand to the wood before she had slammed it. Aaron’s face had fallen in disappointment. He brushed his hair back over his face. I can’t stop thinking about that. The drool, the door slamming. How my face must have looked when I turned around. What she looked like in her bedroom. I can’t stop thinking about it for a lot of different reasons. Like why did he let me sleep on him like that? And why did he warn me when she opened the door if he really wanted to see her? Was it an accident he woke me up? Did he know I would have been pissed if he didn’t? Who fucking knows.

The headset rings in my ear. Chicken nuggets. 9:14 PM. 28 minutes all together. Another 4 bucks. That’s a gallon and a half of gas. That’s enough to get home and back a few times. The guy who sold me the Saturn said it got 30 a gallon. He was talking out of his ass. It gets 24 on a good day. The headset is beeping again but I have to check my phone. When Lunachick takes the headset she starts spluttering. I squeeze her shoulder. She has a pretty face, heart shaped and all

that, her fingernails are always painted too. Today they are electric yellow with tiny white polka dots.

Inside the bathroom I lock the stall door. There are 4 texts from Aaron about wanting a ride to Quik Trip after work. A missed call from the house. Like 6 facebook notifications. When I pull my yoga pants down the thighs are so worn out the light passes through them. I finger the lint pills. My period is way heavier than usual. And I bought the cheap tampons last month without the applicator, but I'm already out of those, so now I either have wads of toilet paper or use those giant fucking diaper pads we've had under the sink for years. When I unwrap it the thin purple packaging floats onto the red and yellow speckled floor. I've been switching between the same 2 black yoga pants for like three weeks. I try to wash them less hoping they'll last longer, so I can't get blood on them now. My real black work pants don't fit anymore. I thought my manager would say some smart shit about the yoga pants being off uniform, but I don't think he's noticed. The last time I bought new ones was when I was on that keto-something diet.

Hell, not even my nice shit fits. Fucking nothing. The funeral dress from my grandmother's viewing doesn't. She literally bought it for me. She wanted us to look nice for her funeral, that's what she said, handed over her credit card and everything. Grandma was the queen of "staying trim," that's what she called it. Trim. Momma kept Grandma's little blue combination set for Easter, the one with the matching blazer. I used to try it on when I was younger. The last time I did, I busted a seam in the shoulder though. Wherever she is now she's definitely staying trim.

When I was 15 Grandma used to send me big envelopes with jeans inside. A size 8 when I was really a size 12. I just was too embarrassed to tell her the truth. I just told myself, yeah, when I lose 10 or 20. When I was 13 I convinced myself I would even out, like grow a few more

inches. The doctor told me at my physical that year I'd probably be 5'5 max. I cried on the drive home.

There is a McCafe cup with lipstick around the lid wedged into the sany bin. I have blood on my hands and I leave fingerprints all over the white toilet paper, my fingers are still stained when I'm done. When I was 16, Momma used to buy Tampax, but I hated Tampax, and one day I was complaining about them, and how I really liked Kotex, like way better, and she threw the empty box at me and said, well damn, buy them yourself then. She used to do a lot of shit to save money, like this little trick with a razor blade to scrape off all the tiny lint pills on pants and sweaters, but every time I do it I just shred holes in all my fucking clothes. And everything is so damn expensive. \$9.98 for a pair of khakis at Wal-Mart. That's like more than an hour of work. An hour of my fucking life. In the mirror above the sink "EMPLOYEES MUST WASH HANDS" stares back in my face. God, I look like shit. I should have at least put concealer on today. My phone vibrates again. 9:22 PM. It's the house. She probably wants food. There are granola bars and cereal at home. She only begs if I pick up. If it goes to voicemail she clicks off. But I try not to bring any home because she just sits in front of the microwave and watches the fries go round with her mouth open. On that 600-pound-life show they say don't be an enabler and I'm trying not to be an enabler, okay. On Saturdays before I work the night shift, I turn that show on in the living room and leave the volume up loud, then I leave. I know she has to hear some of it because by the time I get home at 11 the TV is always off.

I've been in here for 8 minutes. I can pass off 8 minutes, but not 10, that's Lunachick's breaking point. In the dining room, a TV blares SpongeBob. The light coming in through the front window is purple and filled with dusk. Only 30 more minutes. The mat makes my feet hurt. The beeping makes my head ache. The sponge over the earpiece makes my ear sweat. An old

man cusses me out because he said he wanted a double quarter pounder, not the meal, with a large Coke and a large fry and I said it'd be cheaper to just do the meal, but he said no, and when he pulled up it was 10.82, and he said why the hell is it so expensive. What the fuck. I can't fucking win.

When I finally get out, when I finally leave out the backdoor the night air hits my face and I can breath, the smell of the wet grass is enough to drop my head back and look up. 60 fucking dollars. The sky is navy and milky with clouds, starless. I strap myself into the front seat of my car and rest my head on the steering wheel. I open tomorrow morning at 6am. I'm back here in 6 hours and 26 minutes. My pop-up headlights grind to life when I crank my car on.

I have to stop by the house. I park in the alley and hug the fence to dodge the tall weeds. They need mowed. I could do it myself. Or pay the neighbor kid 15 bucks. He used to charge 10 dollars but now he's like 14 so he thinks he needs more money or something. As I walk I dip my hands down and feel the long thin blades tangle up in my hands and rip out a fistful. It's a start. I slip in the front door and the house is quietly humming. In my bedroom, in my underwear drawer, I find what I need. The case is velvet. I can hear the TV from Momma's room, it's reruns of *Rosanne*. If I'm real quiet I can hear the laugh track between our walls at night. Sometimes I don't know if she watches all night, or just lets it play while she sleeps. Whenever they do the episode where Dan dies I can hear her cry though. She never watches the episode where they made him out to be a cheater. She doesn't even like the season where they won the lotto.

The screen door slams behind me. The porch reeks of cat piss. Whenever Missy is in heat all the boy cats from the neighborhood stalk our yard. Momma always said that they know she's ready. They can smell it. She used to say that someday boys will be able to smell that I'm ready too. She doesn't say that anymore. Not since Aaron started hanging around. She probably thinks

we already did it. But we haven't. We mostly just sell his food stamps for cash and then use the money to buy weed, and smoke and eat Oreos on the couch. And honestly Momma would never ask. I wouldn't know what to say if she did, because, like, no, but like, fuck, I don't know.

I love to go driving with him. Really it's my chance to be away for a second. Even when I barely got enough for gas I still pick him up and drive to Target to just walk around. They have those lawn furniture sections and we can sit on the swings for hours before store employees kick us out, and even then it's usually just cause they're closing. The upholstery in my car smells like his menthols. He keeps the crushed pack in his back pocket. His jeans always have a little square worn into them.

When I finally pull up I let my car idle outside of Aaron's doublewide. I only have 6 hours and 2 minutes. I make sure I flick the headlights out. His dad hates when my brights shine in the front window and once he came out to tell me so. That night he looked like an older more tired version of Aaron. It made me feel so bad looking at his sleepy face that I make sure to never do it now. He wasn't mean, he just whispered at me. I liked that.

While I wait in the driveway I pull my wallet from my purse and count the bills again, just to make sure. 10, 10, 2 5's. 30. I tighten them into a roll and slide them into my bra. Really I just can't stand the idea of losing it somewhere. I always lose shit. I throw my purse into backseat and watch for him.

Tonight Aaron's dark hair is soft and feathered, bobbing in the night air when he comes out. He catches the screen door with his fingertips and closes it gently. He smiles at me and knocks his fingers against the hood of my car. He always grabs my knee when he gets in. I squeeze. Then I know to pop it into reverse. He is already smiling, he pulls out his phone and tries to show me a meme of that guy from Nickelback but I can't balance my focus between the

road and his wobbling screen. I pretend that I read it and laugh anyway. I've probably already seen it. He shoves it back into his pocket. I still got all that shit in my head and I want to just turn on Spotify and have us be alone together for a second. I flip through the viral 50. Young Thug, Cardi B, Bruno Mars. 5 hours and 44 minutes.

"How's your mom?"

"You know." I take a tight turn and watch him from the corner of my eye, dropping my phone between my legs.

Silence just stretches over us like a wet fucking blanket. He never does it, not what I want. Maybe that's a good thing. I check my face in the rearview mirror. When you smell like fried food, who would want to fuck you? I watch him at the stoplight, he'd been talking but I didn't catch any of it. I nod anyway. Something flashes fast in his eyes.

"She's not fucking worth your time Jess. 5150 her already. Send her off."

I can feel my stomach in my throat and I want to gag. My face is pink, I know it. It's a great mystery. She's weird. She won't come out. But that also means he's never fucking met her. I nod. I get it, okay? Usually Aaron lets me open the joke, lets me decide what's fair. Not today. I need to distract him, change the subject, I don't want him to keep talking.

"Can I bum a cig?"

He hands me one from his crumpled carton and I light it between my teeth. My grandma used to keep hers in the freezer, to keep them fresh. Aaron, in comparison, just lets them fucking rot. The filter is soft and crumpled against my tongue. I can remember my mother before Grandma Grace died. Yeah, I mean we were still poor as shit, but it wasn't like this. She was at least a little more regular before, she used to at least try a little more. She used to work at 3am at the post office every morning and everybody in the whole neighborhood knew her. During

Christmas they'd leave her little notes with money in them, or tins full of cookies. I remember she used to do those crash diets. You know, like cups full of vinegar or four grapefruits a day. I want to tell Aaron all of this, but I also feel like punching him in his fucking teeth. I think about putting out my cigarette on the back of my own hand. I yank the wheel hard.

"Jess, why are we stopping at EzPawn?" I look at him and pull my purse from the backseat.

"To pawn shit, duh." I want to hurt his feelings back for being such a prick.

"Well, yeah, I know, but like, what? I thought you already sold all the nice plates and cups from your house. What's left?" Now all we have are plastic ones with little half scraped off chili peppers.

I don't know how to talk about it, so I don't say anything. When the owner finishes selling a car stereo to a chick in a little dress, I dump my purse on the counter. I had been stupid, a fucking idiot actually. I'd done the math all wrong and thought I had another check coming this month when I didn't. Blew my last 50 bucks on a pack of cigarettes, weed, and a box of old VHS's for Momma from the thrift store. Aaron usually pays for it, but this time he just looked at me, and then back at his stupid ass dealer friend. The water is going to be shut off tomorrow. It is always like this, always something, just when I'm getting my head above water, just when shit is shaping up. I check my phone: I have to be back at work in 5 hours and 22 minutes.

Momma always kept these pearls in a blue velvet box. I snatched them from inside her underwear drawer when she was in the bathroom last week. I never saw her wear them so they had to be worth something. She had watched me carry out the crystal water goblets and hadn't said a word. She knew right? This wouldn't be any different, right?

I pop open the box and drop it on the glass display case. The owner looks at me, his face blank, and fingers the string of pearls, holding them up to the light.

“These are fake. Sorry kid.”

March 8th
2016

Hey Momma,

It's been a slow day today. Sundays are visiting days for all the families. The residents have been playing bingo all day - and we had live music. Lots of kids and grandkids are here. I know how much you love getting letters in the mail, so I wanted to write you another one! I know you kind of think it's silly because I'll probably see you tonight, but I really do enjoy it. I'm on my feet all day and this is an excuse to sit down for a second and take a breather.

Momma, I want you to know I'm so proud of you. If you're reading this it means you walked out to your mailbox yourself. That makes 10 whole times! I know, I know - you don't think it's much, you want to go further and do more things. Doctor Jensen says to take it slow. She doesn't want you pushing too far and hurting yourself. You're doing just the right amount for right now. She cares about you and knows what's best. She's a good doctor.

You know - I have this memory of being in the car together. I think I was really little. But we

were dining somewhere real late
 and you were singing this song.
 God - what was it? Something...
 never known a girl like you before?
 Do you remember that? It's been
 stuck in my head all day. Watch
 the next time I see you - you'll be
 humming it. I swear that always
 happens. You know what I'm thinking
 before I do.

I can't wait for us to sing and
 dance with the baby in the
 kitchen. I'm so lucky to have
 all of us, 3 generations - living so
 near to one another. She had a
 tribe already.

Love you,

Jesse

P.P.S. If you stop by the house
 don't worry about mopping the
 floors. Just take care of your
 kitchen, don't worry about mine.
 And don't argue with me! You
 do too much.

“Don’t. Please don’t.”

It’s been six days. They pulled up the linoleum and the carpet in the living room. They found the hardwood underneath, but there are all these gaps now, inches of terrible sharpness between rooms. I gotta walk around with these little pink slippers Jesse bought, milky soft, the staples stick right in em’. Now I must hover in doorways, away from the unfinished places. Mother said the hardwood made the house cold, hard to clean too, but now folks are saying they want the wood back, that’s what Jesse says anyway, she’s been watching all this HGTV on the television. “Momma, it’s just cosmetic upgrades, that’s it.” She said that while she was cutting my hair. Cosmetic. Pretty. Beautiful maybe. She had the scissors in her left hand. Mother thought the yellow paint outside was beautiful, I thought it was awful ugly. When I was kid, a goldfinch hit the glass window in the living room and broke its neck. I think what Jesse wanted to say was “small” and not “cosmetic.” But it’s been weeks of all these big men. And now six days since they’ve been back. They perform all this drilling and hammering and bang bang banging. I put my hands over my ears even after they leave because the sound is still in the air, floating. Jesse says this is good, real good, needed, much needed, long overdue, a nice change, good for us, and “Grandma would have loved it Momma.”

When they swapped out the old fridge for the new one – the one Jesse bought down at that Habitat For Humanity Restore, at discount, I found these little things. They must have been there all along, underneath. “515-876-5677, Gertie, Willard Elementary”. “Earl - Call Ronald back about working Easter weekend”. A cut out recipe from *Better Homes* for sour cream cake. A paper report card. B, B, A, A, A, C+. A Jesse painting of tulips and the sun in the corner from 4th grade, I know cause I wrote “Jessica, 4th grade 2004” on the back in blue pen. A horoscope that Jesse ripped out of the *Des Moines Register* in high school. “Sagittarius: If you can resolve

the historical, you can resolve the present. Bonus: Sometimes this happens without actually having to get your hands dirty in the present.” I lined them up nice and put them all under my mattress so I could feel them.

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MOCHA FLAVORED SOUR CREAM CAKE

CAKE: Preheat oven to 350°F. Combine 3 cups Gold Medal® flour, 3 teaspoons baking powder, 1 teaspoon baking soda and 1 teaspoon salt; set aside. In bowl combine 1 cup Imperial® margarine and 1 cup sugar; beat until creamy. Add 3 eggs, one at a time, beating thoroughly after each addition. Add flour mixture alternately with 1 cup sour cream.

Filling: Combine 1 6-oz. pkg. (1 cup) Nestlé's® semi-sweet chocolate morsels, 1/2 cup firmly-packed brown sugar, and 2 tablespoons Taster's Choice® 100% Freeze-Dried Coffee; mix. Spoon one third of cake batter into greased 10" bundt pan. Sprinkle with 1/2 filling mixture. Cover with another third of batter; then sprinkle with remaining filling. Cover with rest of batter.

BAKE at 350°F. **TIME:** 1 hour 10 minutes. Cool 15 minutes; turn out onto cake rack. Cool completely at room temperature. Drizzle cake with Coffee Glaze.

COFFEE GLAZE: Dissolve 2 teaspoons Taster's Choice® 100% Freeze-Dried Coffee in 3 tablespoons boiling water. Add to 1-3/4 cups sifted confectioners' sugar and stir until smooth.

Makes 1 10" cake.

*Omit baking powder and salt if using self-rising flour.



Neat Cake, Neat Coffee, Neat Idea from Taster's Choice®!

Here's a nifty combination to try over the Holidays! It's delicious cake using Taster's Choice® 100% Freeze-Dried Coffee. After the cake is made, try serving it to friends and relatives with a cup of Taster's Choice® regular Or Taster's Choice® Decaffeinated, it's 97% CAFFEIN-FREE but looks, smells, and tastes fresh perked. Neat cake, Neat coffee, Neat idea!



'tis the season for pleasin' with marshmallows

It's crunchy, 'n chewy, 'n so delicious! And, you make it with two family favorites, Kellogg's® Rice Krispies® cereal and the great-tasting recipe for Marshmallow Treats on the box. Whip up a batch for your brood's Holiday eating. The

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Imperial® Holiday Cookies

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On lightly floured surface, roll dough to 1/8" thickness. Cut in desired shapes with 2-1/2" cookie cutter. Brush lightly with milk. Sprinkle with colored sugar candy decorations or chopped nuts. Bake on greased cookie sheet at 325° about 6-8 minutes. Cool slightly; remove from pan. (Or bake cookies plain and glaze with confectioners sugar blended with milk.) Makes about 6 dozen.

*One cup Imperial® margarine equals 2 bars or 1 tub. To use packing boxes and eat it using softening time.



A Tradition of Great Taste...Holiday Cookies from Imperial®

Try these great holiday cookies, fresh from the oven—made with Imperial® Margarine, the only margarine with fresh, delicious flavor fit for a queen or king. There are additional recipes right on the other side of this page—in the Taster's Choice® and Rice Krispies® ads. And you can get even more recipes in specially-marked Gold Medal® flour sacks in your favorite supermarket.



Triple Treat Holiday Bars from Gold Medal® Flour.

easy to make. Take one bar. Bake one bar. Then top. Three different, delicious ways. Candied chocolate glaze, crunchy almonds. Triple Treat Holiday Bars recipe in this sack of Gold Medal® flour. For other Gold Medal® flour recipes in the Imperial® margarine and Taster's Choice® sections of Recipe Treats insert.

practice. What real is what's going on. So: What's going on?

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22-Dec. 21).

If you can resolve the historical, you can resolve the present. Bonus: Sometimes this happens without actually having to get your hands dirty in the present.

They rolled up the linoleum and took it away the next day. Vinegar and water everyday. Spic and Span once a week. Down on all fours once a month. Baseboards, never forget the baseboards. Before they took it away I came to it on my knees. I spread out on the cold floor. There were pieces of raw macaroni near the vent, Cocoa Puffs under the stove. I pressed my ear to the ground. It breathed, a gasping inhale, a mouth sucking. I felt its wet teeth against my ear. I pressed my face into it hard, smashing my nose against one of the worn white squares. When I opened my eyes the black checkers to the left and right became blinders. The floor buckled, went concave, let me rest on top like a scoop of ice cream. On the opposite side my mother looked at the popcorn ceiling above her, she reached a manicured finger to a bubbling brown streak. She pricked it, and I fell through, into her.

So now I've got her trapped in me. And when they rolled that linoleum up like a giant cigarette and took it away, I had no way to put Mother back. It's been six days. At first when she died and they put her in that casket, and she looked all old and wilted I thought about ghosts. Mother's ghost would write out "Thank You" notes for all the gifts I hadn't properly thanked people for. Mother's ghost would check my blood pressure and make beetroot and bananas appear in the refrigerator. Mother's ghost would shine the silver and wrap it up in Ziploc bags, away from the open air.

There was none of that. But now I've got her wedged in me and that's much worse than a ghost. And we can't talk, and I don't see her, but I feel her rattling, like she did, knocking on the window from the outside, for me to bring out more Windex and a clean rag, slamming the front gate when my father didn't oil it like he promised he would, running down hospital hallways away from me. She's rocking around everything inside me, making it loose. I keep trying to hold

on, to the edge of the table, or the door frame, I keep trying to catch the teacups, and the lamps, and the flower vases from falling from all of these edges, but I don't have enough palms.

And she knew, she knew I got the motion sickness. She knew how those spinning worlds could pull everything out of me, that the backseat of her Buick could steal away my lunch. She knew because she kept an empty coffee can back there just for that purpose. And she is being real mean now, making everything revolve like this, taking away dinner like this. How can you eat when your mother is putting woozy in your head?

Worst of all, I hear it. Those words. Not because she is saying them now, but because they were already there lurking. When she died she'd had a tube stuck down her throat all week and they removed it for me, but I really thought they should have removed it for her, because it was her tube, and not mine, and I really thought they should have asked her, and not me. Jessica had held Mother's hand and made little sniffing noises. That was very hard for Jesse. When my dad died it wasn't like that because he hadn't been a whole person in a long time, so in a way it was like he had died a long time ago. Not mother though. "Routine surgery" was what she had written in a letter. A little fussy stomach issue. But the doctors said she must have sucked something up through her body, into her lungs, something bad, something that could grow in there. And then there was pneumonia. And the medicines that made her heart swell like a big throbbing balloon. The nurses cooed about "making her as comfortable as possible" and "a little of this for the pain" and "she signed the DNR." I had thought these nurses would be the same nurses from when I was little. The pretty ones with starched white outfits who bent at the knee to touch my cheeks. I had thought they would be the ones who knew my mother for years, that they would dote over her, buzzing around her head, fixing her perm and feeding her ice chips. But

these nurses were blank machines, a hardened smile even when I told them my mother, yes, my mother, had been a nurse for forty years. Just a little “oh!” that’s all they gave her.

At the hospital Mother’s hands were big and filled with water. Her head trembled from side to side. I wanted her to get up, get the hell up and get out of this place. To come home, damn it. To let me and Jesse take care of her in our house, where she needed to be. I was waiting for her to wake up so I could tell her this. I was waiting a long time, so long Jessica had gone down to the cafeteria to eat pudding parfaits. When she finally woke up she couldn’t hear me even when I whisper yelled. She just looked at the ceiling for a long time and finally she told me it. “Gertie, don’t. Please don’t.”

Those words are here now, sticking like pins, floating in the vomit inside my head. I know what they mean. For a few years I made them mean other things. Gertie, don’t forget me. Gertie, don’t be afraid. Gertie, don’t worry. Gertie, don’t leave me. Gertie, don’t be so hard on yourself. But the truth wore big heavy boots and stomped around in my heart so I tried to compromise. Gertie, don’t make Jessica sit in timeout too long. Gertie, don’t keep a cake in the refrigerator for more than four days. Gertie, don’t sell your father’s lawnmower even though it’s broken. Gertie, don’t let Jessica waste money on those jeans with rips in the knees. But even that wasn’t enough of a sacrifice. I knew what it was all along. I had just been swaddling it, smothering it. I knew.

Gertie, don’t. Please don’t sell the house.

I found a jar of jam inside the new refrigerator and I saw those words written from the inside. When I watch the TV I hear all the housewives say it. When the men come their hammers scream it. I try, I try real hard to not listen to it. But Jessica got my disability figured out, she got the paperwork done for me and everything. Then she did all this running around town for it too.

She took a few classes and got her CNA so she's making better money. She put all of Grandma's inheritance away. She saved it all up for *this*. She won't say it out loud but I see it in the Internet searches in her cell phone. She wants us to be comfortable. Somewhere easier. An apartment. No yard to take care of. No upkeep. Separate entrances with separate bathrooms so she can have her own space. I hear what she says about this house to the men. "Too far gone," "Sell it now while the market is up," "Give it a facelift," "Too much responsibility," "High maintenance." I hear what she tells me. "Momma, I wanna downsize so I can better save money, to take care of you." "Momma, don't you wanna live someplace nice?" "Momma, we will have a better life."

I had told myself. I had told Jesse. Envelopes filled with money. New school shoes. An oil change for the car. Five pounds of ground beef too many Mother had bought on accident. I had to say this was love. And this house? The tightest hug. When Jesse was little and we mined out our love from beneath homemade living room forts, and found it inside *Bernstein Bears* books, for me, that was like relief. When Jesse turned fifteen and started asking for things – cell phones, and cable television, and a place that she could take her friends home to without feeling embarrassed, I almost died. This is how I know selling the house is betrayal.

My mother is nodding somewhere in my gut. I tried to preserve pieces, those scraps under the fridge, a crystal water goblet still unchipped, a strip of the wallpaper from her old bedroom. Those weren't enough. Today I even put away a loose brick, one long sharp piece of drywall, and a door hinge. I hoarded them up. Not enough. Mother shakes and shakes and hisses in my lungs. I want to reach in and hold her chin, give her stillness. On the kitchen table, Jessica has laid out sheets of clean printer paper. They show the floor plans to the new apartment. There is a back balcony that leads to the parking lot, a kitchen that stretches out into the living room, even a walk in closet. I bend over at the waist and open my eyes hard, and press my nose against

the paper. I make Mother look, I make her see. Jesse is standing in the doorway to the kitchen holding a green ceramic mug. She steps through and runs her hand over my shoulder and down my back. Mother softens. Jesse bends down next to me, and rests her face on the sheet of paper. She does it with me, but she doesn't make herself look. She lets her cheek touch the paper and closes her eyes. My mouth is at her ear. I say it. "This is good, real good, needed, much needed, long overdue, a nice change, good for us. Grandma would have loved it Jesse."

I heard it, how it was meant all along, but didn't know until now.

"Gertie, don't. Please don't forget to tell Jessica I love her."

Appendix: Sweets

HARMON GLASS**SIOUX FALLS, S.DAK. (605) 336-2478**

West 10th and Duluth

MARSHALL, MINN. (507) 532-3244

425 West Main

SIOUX CITY, IOWA (712) 252-3629

710 Nebraska Street

YOU SAY WHERE -
WE'LL BE THERE**CALL COLLECT**

melt 2lb. white almond bark
in pan in oven at 200°

add 1^{c.} peanut butter
cool slightly

add 3^{cup} rice krispies

add 3^{c.} little marshmallows

add 1^{c.} dry roasted peanuts

mix drop on waxed
paper by spoonfuls.
cool.

makes 60

YOUR SERVICE
REPRESENTATIVE:**VIC HANSON**



Make This COOKIE TREE

Martha Gooch
Recipes and instructions
in this folder

HOW TO MAKE YOUR COOKIE TREE

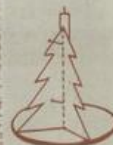
1. Cut three Christmas tree shapes from light card board. (Tablet book- ing or the boards laundries return shirts on will work well). Cut the first one- making sure that both sides have "branches" of the same size and shape-then pattern the other two after it. Across the base, your tree should be a little less than the width of the plate you'll use it on. The height should be a little less than the length of the candle you'll use. (See below.) Fold each cut-out through the center-see drawing.



2. Select a dinner plate to be the base of the Cookie Tree. In its center, stand a 10" or 12" candle. Some candle wax melted on the plate will hold the candle upright.



3. Flatten the cardboard tree shapes and, cut aluminum foil to their size and shape-allowing about 1/4" extra to fold over the cardboard. Cover both sides of the cardboard with foil and crimp foil over the edges of the cardboard. Bend the foil-covered cardboard again to right angles. Pin the three pieces of cardboard around the candle at even intervals-allowing the bottom of the "branches" to rest on the edge of the plate. Insert pins at the fold line, through the cardboard and into the candle.



4. Your plate will now be divided into six equal segments by the "branches" of the Cookie Tree. Fill each segment with a different kind of cookie made with the recipes in this folder. Pile the cookies up toward the top of the tree. Light candle and bring forth Cookie Tree to the accompaniment of your family's festive shouts of delight.



JEWELED PYRAMIDS

Pretty little pyramids with their decorative jeweled top and bottom practically melt in your mouth.

Oven Temp: 325° F. **Time:** 25 to 30 Minutes **Makes:** 3½ dozen

Combine in mixing bowl: 3½ cups sifted Gooch's Best Enriched Flour, ½ cup each of butter and margarine. Start mixer at low speed and mix until it resembles coarse corn meal.

Add: ½ cup brown sugar, 1 cup finely chopped pecans, 1 teaspoon vanilla. Continue mixing until it is like pie dough.

Roll: 1 tablespoonful of dough into round balls, then shape into cone shape.

Place: on ungreased baking sheet.

Bake: in a slow oven (325°) 25 to 30 minutes or until light brown.

Remove from pans: to cooling rack.

Dip: bottom and top of cookies in caramel sauce, then in finely chopped pecans (1½ cups pecans).



CARAMEL SAUCE
Combine: in top of double boiler, 7½ candy caramels, ¼ cup milk. Melt over hot water.

SAINT NICK'S SNOWFLAKES

These delicious tawny orange and lemon flavored bars will stay fresh and moist for days.

Oven Temp: 375° F. **Time:** 25 Minutes **Makes:** 45 bars



Sift together: 2 cups sifted Gooch's Best Enriched Flour, ½ teaspoon each of salt and baking powder.

Beat: 4 egg whites until soft mounds begin to form.

Add gradually: 1½ cups confectionery sugar, beating well after each addition. Continue beating until stiff, straight peaks are formed.

Cream: ½ cup butter or margarine, 1 cup sugar. Beat until light and fluffy.

Add: 4 egg yolks, one at a time. Beat for 1 minute.

Blend in: dry ingredients alternately with ¼ cup each of lemon and orange juice. Blend thoroughly after each addition.

Mix in: 1 tablespoon each of grated orange and lemon rind, ½ cup chopped pecans.

Fold in: stiffly beaten egg whites.

Pour into: well-greased and lightly floured 13½ x 10½ x 1 inch pan.

Bake: in moderate oven (375°) 25 minutes.

FROSTING

Melt: ½ cup butter or margarine, remove from heat.

Blend in: 3 cups sifted confectionery sugar, 1 tablespoon each of lemon and orange juice. Beat until smooth and of spreading consistency.

Spread: over cookies while still warm.

Cool: completely.

STARLIGHT CHEWIES

The kiddies and grown-ups too will say "ummmmm more please" when they taste these tiny chewies with their tasted flavor.

Oven Temp: 350° F. **Time:** 15 to 18 Minutes **Makes:** 1 Dozen

Cream together: ½ cup each of shortening and butter, 1 cup brown sugar, firmly packed, 1 teaspoon vanilla, until light and fluffy.

Blend in: 2 cups Gooch's Best Enriched Flour until thoroughly mixed, 1 cup each of walnuts and grapefruit.

Measure out dough by teaspoonful and roll into balls.

Dip into: egg-white mixture (1 beaten egg and 1 tablespoon water).


Roll: in coconut.

Place: on greased baking sheet.

Bake: in moderate oven (350°) 15 to 18 minutes. Remove to cooling rack immediately.



Soda Bread 2 loaves.

2 Cup ~~liquid~~ ^{milk} 
 $\frac{1}{4}$ C. sugar
 $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp. salt.

1 Pkg. yeast dissolved in
 $\frac{1}{4}$ C. warm water.
 $\frac{1}{4}$ C shortening, melted.

3 flour to make stiff dough 6-8 C.

Let raise until double. Bulk
 Make into 2 loaves of bread
 and let raise until double
 and bake. Starting @ 400
 for 15 min then 350 ~~and~~ for
 35 min.

If rolls bake @ 400 for
 20 minutes.

Look Inside

The choice to write about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and embodied trauma in the form of a linked story collection felt immediate to me as writer. Its orbiting sense, and the nonlinear fashion in which it is written, all align with the symptoms of PTSD. It is also the opportunity to disassociate and dissolve between characters. It presents the chance to be triggered from one memory, read or experienced in a previous chapter into another, dozens of pages later. This is the strength of the genre. Hemingway when operating within this genre chose to fill these spaces with silence, with isolation, with violence. *In Our Time* speaks to a specifically masculine identity that is reeling from the shell shock of World War I. It was the first time language was given to this feeling – PTSD – the foggy, complicated, disorganization that can lead to painful hallucinations.

In comparison, I take the strengths of this genre and utilize them in much different ways than Hemingway, to discuss embodied trauma. Where he wrote large-scale explosive masculine experiences, my work deals with the little violences within the routine lives of female identified individuals. By doing this I will locate marginalized voices within a strong literary tradition. I will work first on the micro level of language within *In Our Time* to explore Hemingway's use of diction, understatement and distance to portray mental illness and trauma and its relationship to masculinity. I will also interweave an analysis of my own work, which will provide a contrast. This exploration will ultimately uncover the repercussions of canonizing such a stifling (dare I say toxic) perspective on trauma.

In Hemingway's linked collection two stories stand out in particular. *The End of Something* and *Big Two-Hearted River: Part II* share the common action of fishing, a very specifically gendered activity. These scenes take place after Nick, the protagonist, has returned

from World War I. The genre of linked stories allows for readers to view characters from multiple angles, a valuable orbiting perspective. This choice is exceptionally strong when analyzing embodied trauma.

It is important to note that both of these scenes have similar charged objects, bait and rods. “Charged objects” are items within a linked story collection that are seen time and time again. A pair of boots at the beginning of a collection might connect to the loss of a father figure, and when it resurfaces chapters later, that weight comes into sharp focus for readers, a triggered memory and emotional response. This is a point of craft that I have utilized as well. In these scenes the rods and bait are emblematically male, one might even argue phallic in nature. This connects the objects and their violence to masculinity.

These two stories are rendered with classic Hemingwayesque terse declarative sentences that heavily utilize understatement. Both stories follow Nick, a Midwestern boy who has gone off to war and returned changed. In the earlier chapter, *The End of Something* bait is referenced. The episode goes as follows: “Nick caught three of them with his hands and cut their heads off and skinned them while Marjorie chased with her hands in the bucket, finally caught a perch, cut its head off and skinned it” (32). His aggression exists in contrast to her softness. The actions are violent. The use of the word ‘cut’ in itself is sharp, a short, tiny declarative. It works to slice, just as a knife does. The imagery of skinning the perch alive and their decapitation is gruesome and their amount is weighted too. Nick is able to bait three quickly while Marjorie only obtains one. In this moment the scenery is also described as damaged. The lumber town is abandoned. All of this, including Nick’s internal darkness and violence are consequences of the war. They mimic one another. Nick’s embodied trauma of living through the war is showcased in his actions. It manifests as violence, even on the micro-scale.

The intensity of this scene is heightened further when compared to the events of *Big Two-Hearted River: Part II*. “Another hopper poked his face out of the bottle. His antennae wavered... Nick took him by the head and held him while he threaded the slim hook under his chin, down through his thorax and into the last segments of his abdomen” (148). Even the bait itself is nicknamed with “hopper” and humanized, given a face and an action. The grasshopper makes the move himself to come out of the bottle – a kind of ownership the perch did not have. The verbs “took” and “threaded” compared to “cut”, “skinned” and “chased” provide an even deeper division between the two sections. In the second quote “took” and “threaded” are tame and non-confrontational. When read alone they don’t signify violence. Even “threaded” leans towards the domestic – sewing, weaving or knitting, but overall the creation of something. “Skinned” “cut” and “chased” are charged and related directly to carnage. These two scenes are microcosms of two opposing emotional tones. This scene, for example, has language that signifies peace. While they inhabit only a small space in the stories they are being utilized as tools. In *Big Two-Hearted River: Part II* Nick’s PTSD is not directly manifested as violently as it previously had been. Instead it is measured and calculated. It is important to note that Nick chooses isolation in this scene. He has returned to nature, to fishing, to be completely alone.

In the first story Nick is bogged down with the gravity of returning home after war. He is shaken by the trauma he experienced there and the effects ripple out from him. When we return almost a hundred pages later he is invested in social isolation as a form of self-care. He is not able to heal in the presence of Marjorie. He cannot be vulnerable with her. Processing the very specific masculine trauma of war is something that must be done alone. Even then we are still only keyed in based on innuendo and allusion, never is the pain actually named or given language. Instead it simmers beneath the surface, a silent insidious aching. We are told that men

do not speak about this grief. The genre of linked stories makes this distinction particularly clear. Separated by both space and time, on the page and within the collection, they form a call and response. At first the traumatized male body expresses pain through violence, and then later, heals through isolation.

In my own writing, Jess, Gertie's daughter, cracks open the complicated relationship between love and obligation with her mother. "She's like a lightning rod, everything hurts her." Where Hemingway had written of isolation, I push toward solidarity. My characters lean, they hold up, they offer care. Jess is so attuned to her mother's needs that she is capable of naming them herself. The use of "everything" becomes a moment of hyperbole. We as readers must know the extent to which Jess's care goes. She protects her mother from *everything*. This adaption of the linked story genre allows multiple characters to have space. Each one is given voice, while Hemingway had focused on singularity. For him, the masculine has become the only. My perspective on embodied gendered trauma offers up the collective, an intergenerational frame to process trauma together as a unit. The genre and my usage of it permits and encourages multiplicity and duality.

On the topic of violence, compared to Hemingway my characters do not enact it in the same way. Instead readers are given a glimpse at the want to defend one's self, without any power to actually manifest those desires. "Doctor Jensen's big fingers had reached toward my face... My perm was particularly tight... I imagined all those chemicals, that sharp little burn against my scalp, what they might do to his insides if I poured them down his throat". In this section the male doctor Grace encounters uses damaging power dynamics to make her feel threatened and powerless. This is toxic masculinity. Her violent fantasizes are fanatical and extreme, almost sharp to the touch. On the page she begs to be heard and legitimized. The genre

of linked stories again allows for this gendered embodied trauma to echo throughout the non-linear structure, bouncing between women and their daughters, all displayed in their relationship with men. Hemingway uses the genre to give readers a “before and after” for Nick. I have adapted my linked stories do to the same, as well as provide the same moments retold by different characters, the missing “during” or “middle”. My contribution to the genre of lined stories is this exact “lived in” quality, a three-dimensional frame where trauma can be viewed from every angle.

When violence does arise within my collection, it is enacted against the self. “I had given myself little lilac and lemonade colored bruises on my big pale thighs, perfect thumbprint sized pinches. He kissed these.” The shame and their physical reminders are close to the surface. They are fully embodied. Meanwhile, Hemingway’s characters are evasive with their emotions in contrast. The genre of linked stories allows for this scene to truly sing because earlier in the same collection we see a future Gertie engaging in self-destructive behavior of another kind, an eating disorder. Seeing the bruising later needs no explanation, which allows for the possibility of full immersion for readers.

Returning to Hemingway, the action of baiting in *In Our Time* provides a perspective on embodied gendered trauma and the physicality of the rods does too. In *The End of Something* Nick and Marjorie share this observation: “They could both see the two steel rods at an angle over the dark water” (33). The charged object – the rods – are at a distance from the characters. They are alone as well, passive and not in use. The distance between the rods and the couple mimics the emotional distance between Nick and Marjorie. The descriptor of “steel” also furthers a dark, ominous and cold reading. “Steel” also feels particularly mechanized and further from human. The water is described as “dark”, it too is opaque in nature, similar to Nick, its interior

hidden from readers. The question of whether something dangerous lurks beneath the surface is a question we ask of both the water and Nick. Lastly, the rods enforce the concept of separation and isolation and this foreshadowing is deliberate.

Meanwhile, In *Big Two-Parted River Part II* the interactions with the rods is symbolic of relief. “He tested the knot and the spring of the rod by pulling the line taut. It was a good feeling” (147). Here the rod is in physical use and Nick is holding it in his own hands and all distance is gone. “Spring” and “pulling” create an active and engaging tone. They are alive, both coiled tight and tugging. Finally, that last declarative sentence solidifies this claim in straightforward plain language. The use of the phrase “good feeling” is uplifting, so short and yet satisfying. Rarely are we given such honesty. Here it creates duality. A tormented narrator may be telling us fishing for him is enjoyable but it also alludes to inner peace. When the world has been incredibly violent a “good feeling” is hugely positive. This is an omission for our tight-lipped narrator. This tiny piece is the depth to which Nick is able to confront his trauma. Because the story is detail oriented and action based, the inclusion of the emotion carries more importance. Hemingway is explicit in this depiction. The male body after trauma does not seek comfort in others, and it does not internally confront the source of the pain. No hard questions are asked of the self. Processing PTSD does not happen in Hemingway’s writing. When his linked stories circle back on themselves, the dialog is one of pure silence.

In my collection my characters process their trauma. The acknowledgement of neglect is on the page, an omission for Gertie herself. “Gertie, get up” she’d swat at me. “You’re fine, stop this. Please. I’m too busy for you. Go make yourself a snack.” This is also echoed in the cyclical nature of trauma as well, as she commits these same crimes against her daughter through the retelling of memories. “Momma, you let me in?” I’d turn the facet on to drown out the sound of

her little knuckles against the door”. The linked genre supports this kind of discussion, a transportation through time. Where Hemingway’s Nick had left a breadcrumb trail follow, Gertie is screaming directions to us. Her hurt is loud on the page. I have stolen back the genre and utilized it for real, tangible healing and a clearer, more precise understanding of processing trauma.

To further these claims I will look at other examples of short, declarative, iconic, Hemingway sentences inside *In Our Time*. In *The End of Something* one of the examples comes in the form of dialog: “It isn’t fun anymore. Not any of it” (34). The inclusion of “not any of it” is finalizing and cold. Nick is speaking to Marjorie in this quote. Again, through insinuation, readers know this doesn’t just mean fishing. It is in reference to love, their relationship, the abandoned town, and his own life. In this scene, Nick breaks Marjorie’s heart with little regard for her as a person. His own pain is louder than compassion. Nick chooses dismissive anger. Another example: “But they won’t strike,” (32) is a one-liner that is full of hesitation and disappointment. The fish won’t be caught, and by extension, happiness will not be obtained either. For Nick his embodied trauma is only ever expressed through a cycling repetition of violence and silence.

In contrast, in *Big Two-Parted River Part II* the short sentences provide a much different reading. “They were fine trout” (155) is positive and satisfied. “Fine” is quiet, and yet still celebratory. When healing does take place, it is understated. Where the first chapter cited a desire for a catch this chapter embodies fulfillment. Similar to the mention of “not fun” in the earlier chapter, this quotation evokes the opposite response: “Nick laughed” (151). This one is concise and gratifying, the laughter is a relief in response to the tension built in *The End of Something*.

The two scenes discussed in this essay take place over one hundred pages apart but they still interact and speak to one another through their paralleled actions. This is the beauty and strength of linked stories. They stand alone but when juxtaposed, they rise together, creating one smooth curvature. They are both ladders and stepping stools; they are shoulders and helping hands. The use of bait within both chapters is polarizing, but having their opposing presence nods towards subtle shifts. On the specifics, the perch are skinned alive while the grasshopper is only referred to as “threaded”. The rods in both chapters are symbolic and weighted as well. In one they are steely, dark and distant while in the other they are “good”. Lastly, in classic Hemingway fashion, the tight terse sentences of both stories are tone enhancers. The diction used is fiercely strategic. The objects are the same and yet they give different readings. At first, within the collection PTSD is expressed through violence. When the arc is complete no catharsis is met. Isolation is given as a remedy, but there is little proof of healing, only silence on the subject and subtle gestures.

The choice of this action – fishing – is also no surprise. It is an incredibly gendered hobby and pastime that is often associated with rural, white, Midwesterners. In my classrooms Hemingway is noted for these things. “A big game hunter” students had interjected when we read this novel. “Male friendships” was something cited as innately tied to Hemingway as a writer. However, this novel in particular is about a singular man. That feels purposeful here. Nick is processing the powerful pain of war, and PTSD. To have him lean on a male friend would be breaking the silence on his trauma. This seems to be something Nick, as a character is incapable of doing.

Finally, selfishly, I would like to look at the canonization of works such as *In Our Time*. Both John McCain and Barack Obama list *For Whom The Bell Tolls* as one of their favorite

novels. McCain has been sited as the quintessential example of patriotism, a prisoner of war in Vietnam who has dedicated his life to “traditional” family values and politics. The language surrounding him is pure hero worship. Obama, by comparison, is described as a man who speaks “from everywhere.” Born from a Kenyan father and a Kansas mother, raised in Hawaii and educated in Chicago, his speeches often hinge on his belief that America’s biggest strength is it’s diversity. He was this country’s first black president. Each of these politicians, in their own right, represent different aspects of “Americanism”, however polarizing their political beliefs might be, they do share this novel.

While *For Whom The Bell Tolls* is lodged in a European war conflict with a strictly martyr-like narrator, Hemmingway’s other work, namely *In Our Time* is deeply located in Americanness. Stories about war and the masculine experience are still very much apart of our American narrative, as exemplified by these current political figures.

Close to a century later we still think of PTSD as a man’s mental illness, the tragic returned veteran and the double-edged sword of fireworks on the fourth of July. Because of our dear Hemingway, this feels like no surprise. But the research tells us something different. Women are two times more likely to experience posttraumatic stress syndrome than men. That is one in nine woman. But still, the persistent narrative of such trauma focuses on American war writing. McCain himself is a Vietnam veteran, the same war that crafted Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*. O’Brien and Hemingway, and other classic American authors are canonized for discussing an explicitly masculine narrative - what is often painfully absent are female identified voices.

All of these references are notable because they work as mirrors. Two of our politicians, one a past President, the other a maverick in Congress, show us that. They inform our leaders

because they are cultural markers. Not long ago the current sitting President of this country called himself “the Ernest Hemingway of 140 characters”. The combination of this statement and the nineteen sexual assault allegations he possesses is impossibly painful. This is perpetuation. This is historical trauma. This is cyclical abuse, and ultimately, this is the silencing of the feminine voice.

“Misogyny” is another word linked to Hemingway. I am not here to debate the politics of labeling an author as problematic. Instead, I want to face head on the artwork itself. *In Our Time* does beautiful work. I am thankful to have read and learned from it, from a craft perspective. Still, I ask of it more. Above that, I beg for more from the canon. I ask to hear more from non-white, non-masculine, non-wealthy voices. The canon is made of mirrors, a trap, a house of trickery to suffocate inside of. There are not enough windows, and without them, how do we breathe? John McCain and Barack Obama identify with violent, masculine sacrifice, and heroism. But what would it mean to the American public if our leaders were most deeply influenced by Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou or Sandra Cisneros? I do not have those answers yet.

All I can speak to is the validating effort creating artwork that reflects me does for my own survival. Writing this was relief, catching a glimpse of someone you recognize in a crowd. I would like to take a moment to discuss authority as an author, a topic I have thought about constantly while drafting not only this essay, but my entire thesis. I live in communities of writers who ask themselves “are these my stories to tell?” and often we come to one another and say yes, if you are doing them with care, if they are thoughtful and well rendered, if they are multifaceted and researched. These are all actions I have taken myself in the meticulous care of crafting these stories. But I feel it important to also say nonfiction bleeds into my work. My

grandmother is a nurse. My mother does suffer from mental illness. I did write notes on legal pad paper begging her to come out of the bathroom. My truth does not look exactly like this collection, but it does make a pretty convincing fraternal twin. This is to say, creating this collection meant making my own kind of mirror. I very rarely spot stories that truly feel like mine. I know it is a hyper specific one, located in a singular space and time. But in that way I also know it is someone else's window - and I can only hope readers are made better by looking inside.

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Fewest Traumatic Events". *American Psychological Association*, APA, 19 Nov. 2006.

Annotated Bibliography

Boyer, Anne. *Garments Against Women*. Ahsahta Press, 2015.

Boyer's collection of poetry is loose and lyrical, sometimes pushing up against the boundaries of prose. This kind of uncontained writing is a note on structure that I have internalized for my own work. She pushes the boundaries of genre. I have learned from her, through this point on craft. While she writes autobiographically about the female body and its relationship to commodification, I pivot and focus on trauma and the body. Her work is seeped in questions about motherhood – straight from her own daughter's mouth. All of this to say it is imperative and complimentary to the themes I am crafting. The collection reads like a confession and because of this is applicable to my thesis in the form of testimony as well.

Brooks, Victor D. "Home and Family in Early Postwar America" *Boomers: The Cold-War Generation Grows Up*. Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2009.

This rumination on the family structure of America in the 1960's is research that provides a clearer understanding of my character Grace and the era she inhabits. Envisioning housing layouts, the changing landscape, and suburban expansion are all information I need to build my worlds. I mostly enjoy this study for its photographic evidence and inclusion of notable films in the era that reflect social attitude of the time I am writing within.

Calvino, Italo. *Invisible Cities*. Vintage, 2009.

Calvino is an expert at setting. His worlds grow and magnify between the pages. This aspect of craft is something I have carried with me while writing this story. He also experiments with form. He creates structures and forms to then break them unapologetically. The balance between dialog and exposition is also something I have internalized.

Egan, Jennifer. *A Visit From the Goon Squad*. New York: Random House, 2010. Print.

This novel was my primary introduction to linked stories as a genre. Egan compiles fourteen pieces that span decades, share characters, objects, and an overarching premise. It is through her work that I have grasped on this medium, including all of the tools needed to fully realize my final project. She also experiments with form including slide shows and journalistic articles. Egan provides a springboard that I plan on circling back to. One aspect I also find important to notes is her use of time. I will be adopting this method of fracture and return to explore mental illness.

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2013.

Friedan is emblematic of an era. Her writing is reflective of the time period Gertie grows up inside and Grace lives within. While my characters are distanced further from her

specific narrative (she writes of wealthy women, while I focus primarily on working class women) I still find her analysis to be reflective of common social thought in the 1950's and 1960's. Study of her work provides a wealth of topics in domesticity, a prime issue in my writing.

Hemingway, Ernest. *In Our Time*. New York: Scribner Paperback, 1996. Print.

This collection is also in the style of linked stories. I will be using this source in numerous ways. First, his exploration of masculinity and PTSD will be my sparing partner as I crack into femininity. I will also study this collection for its usage of charged objects and their ability to create emotional resonance. Finally, it will be examined within my critical essay in regard to canonization.

Jauss, David. "Stacking Stones: Building a Unified Short Story Collection ." *On Writing Fiction: Rethinking Conventional Wisdom about the Craft*, Writer's Digest, 2011.

This essay is a guide on the mechanics of crafting a linked story collection. It sites numerous examples within this genre as references and develops a comprehensive set of instruments to utilize as a writer. It lists concise objectives and provides a beautiful atlas to writers who want to work within this new arena.

Mellick, W., Sharp, C., & Wilkinson, A. (2017). The moderating role of maternal depression in the relation between adolescent behavioral inhibition and maternal critical expressed emotion. *Child Psychiatry and Human Development*, 48(4), 546-553.

This is a physiological study that I felt complimented the trifold relationship between Gertie, Grace and Jessica. This study delves into the complex relationships between mothers and daughters under the presence of mental illness, namely depression. While I never seek to "diagnose" my characters I still feel that this study and the knowledge it provided gifted me a much needed perspective. It tackles mental illness as not only something that affects an individual but the collective household. Truly it analyses the repercussions on adolescent daughters. Two of my characters deal with similar experiences.

Moen, Phyllis, et al. "Their Mother's Daughters? The Intergenerational Transmission of Gender Attitudes in a World of Changing Roles." *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 59, no. 2, 1997, pp. 281–293. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/353470.

This study was one of the most informative that I have read while researching for my thesis. It examines the changing attitudes women felt towards the role of work spanning decades (1950's-1980's) in the United States. It takes the study one step further by also analyzing the difference between working class women and middle class women, college educated women verse those with only a high school diplomas. This study also touches on varying attitudes on gendered work and overall roles. By including such a comprehensive study I have been able to pinpoint the specific demographic I am writing within and accurately depict their social attitudes.

Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. Vintage Books, 1973.

Morrison writes intimately of women's relationships and friendships in ways that I have deeply admired for a long time. In *Sula* the house and town become places of storytelling – reflective of femininity and family, motherhood and poverty – and much more. Somehow she also balances this social truth with the uncanny, the surreal – juxtaposing the common place with moments unsettling and bizarre. Studying her fiction is an immersion. There are no clear boundaries or binaries but instead only complexity. Her ability to balance this duality has deeply informed my work.

Porter, Max. *Grief Is the Thing with Feathers*. Faber & Faber, 2016.

Porter is a master on genre bending. His novel comes with its own complete set of rules. He combines a single narrative with the fluidity of poetry but provides a road map to his readers. This structure is incredibly compelling to me. I hope to emulate some of his features – making sure to always ground the narrative in a firm temporal understanding. I know that this work can easily become convoluted and I hope to carefully balance craft with accessibility, a task Porter does well.

Schmitz, Oliver, director. *Life, Above All*. Sony Pictures Classics, 2010.

This film is an excellent example of inverted child parent relationships. Chanda and her mother Lillian are located in a much different geographical and cultural setting (South Africa) but I still find the interworkings and dynamics of their relationship beneficial to my study. It is in this vein that I explore similar tensions between Gertie and Jessica. This film is beautifully rendered and the emphasis on femininity and solidarity is emblematic of the narratives I hope to write.

Sondra M. Brandler. "Aged Mothers, Aging Daughters." *NWSA Journal*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1998, pp. 43–56. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/4316553.

While this study does not exactly pertain to my work (because it deals with mother/daughter relationships of elderly persons) I found the study on caretaking to be pertinent to my own writing. This study examines the challenges, disagreements and burdens of such a dynamic – all of which I hope to internalize and expand further in my writing. Caretaking, housework, and the gendered experience of these institutions are something I hope to unpack.

Taranto, Tim. *Ars Botanica: A Field Guide to Loss*. Curbside Splendor, 2017.

This collection is multifaceted. It has found drawings and sketches, epistolary entries and written stories. It is a piece of nonfiction that attempts, and succeeds to encapsulate the three dimensional nature of trauma and loss. While my work is fiction, it does weave elements of nonfiction into places, a cue I've taken from reading this collection. This work also provided me with a guide on "what to include". Taranto has successfully

chosen all of the essential pieces of a lived human experience. This was something I utilized when choosing my found materials.